

TO: Senate Committee on Education  
FROM: Matt Newell-Ching  
RE: Support for SB 1581—School Meals for All  
DATE: February 3, 2026



Chair Frederick, Vice-Chair Weber and Members of the Committee,

Oregon Food Bank’s mission is “to eliminate hunger and its root causes *because no one should be hungry.*” Here’s the reality we face: visits to food pantries across the state are up by 50% since 2023, and cuts to SNAP will worsen this crisis. More than 342,500 Oregonians are expected to lose \$475 million per biennium in food assistance through SNAP. We are calling on Oregon’s leaders to take bold action to prevent our hunger crisis from getting worse...

### Offering Breakfast and Lunch to All Students Has Wide-Ranging Benefits

Today, 1 in 6 kids in Oregon lives in a family that struggles to afford food. Rising costs of food and housing force families to make the impossible decisions between putting a roof over their heads and putting food on the table. Guaranteeing that breakfast and lunch are offered at school at no charge and with no questions asked has a wide range of benefits, including:

- Reducing child hunger<sup>1</sup>
- Better educational achievement and higher attendance<sup>2</sup>
- Fewer Suspensions<sup>3</sup>
- Better health outcomes, including lower blood pressure<sup>4</sup>
- Reduced stigma associated with eating meals at school
- Affordability: families save up to \$1,400 per student in grocery bills
- Eliminates school meal debt and the need to collect it
- Decreased fear among immigrant students and families
- Cutting red tape for schools and families

### Most schools in Oregon now offer free meals, but most that do aren’t fully-funded. SB 1581 fixes this.

Over 95% of schools in Oregon currently offer free breakfast and lunch to all students. While this is a remarkable improvement since the days prior to the Student Success Act when only about 25% of schools offered free meals to all students, three major problems remain that are problematic for students, families, and schools:

<sup>1</sup> <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/SchoolMealsForAll.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/schoolwide-free-meal-programs-fuel-better-classroom-outcomes-for-students/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.kgw.com/article/news/local/solutions/oregon-schools-free-meals-decrease-suspensions/283-01c1d253-11ba-407f-8df4-d50ad8aa8c4d>

<sup>4</sup> <https://hspop.uw.edu/universal-free-school-meals-improve-health-outcomes/>

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- 1. Most schools that offer free meals to all students aren't fully funded.** Oregon's current funding structure - which maximizes federal funding - fills the gap between federal funds up to 90% of meals served by districts, but falls short of fully funding meal programs. This causes zero-sum tradeoffs for districts, who often must choose between whether to purchase fewer fruits and vegetables, compensate workers with lower wages, or rely on district general funds to keep meal programs afloat. **SB 1581 ensures that meal programs are fully funded**, resulting in:
  - Improved nutritional quality, like more fresh fruits and vegetables.
  - An increased ability to compensate nutrition services workers fairly
  - Less strain on district resources intended for educating students
- 2. Twenty one schools in Oregon still require means testing for school meals, causing stigma.** Students who qualify for free meals at the remaining schools that rely on applications face outsized stigma. No student should be made to feel singled out because of their family's income, but this is exactly what happens. Moreover, families with members of the household who are immigrants are often reluctant to fill out forms - even when income-eligible - due to the heightened climate of fear. **SB 1581 ensures all K-12 students in Oregon can attend a school that offers free meals.**
- 3. Schools can fluctuate between offering free meals for all students and means testing, causing confusion, frustration, and meal debt.** During the pandemic, Congress authorized a nationwide waiver that allowed all schools nationwide to offer meals to all students at no charge, no matter their household income. Sadly, the waiver authorizing free school meals for all students expired in June 2022. In the fall of 2022, schools that resumed application-based school meal programs experienced confusion and frustration among students and families. One downstream impact of this was an increase in the amount of meal debt accrued at these schools. **SB 1581 provides consistency for students and families, and stability for workers and school nutrition programs.**

### **Oregon can become the 10th state to offer School Meals for All**

While the federal government disinvests in our communities, Oregon can choose a different path by joining 9 other states (CA, CO, MA, ME, MI, MN, NM, NY, VT) that offer free breakfast and lunch to all students by passing SB 1518. The bill will reduce child hunger, increase meal quality at schools, make Oregon more affordable, improve the mental health of students, support Oregonians who are immigrants, and throw the phrase "school meal debt" into the dustbin of history. The bill guarantees every child in Oregon has access to essential nutrition and the resources needed to excel in school and beyond.

**Oregon Food Bank urges you to support SB 1581.**

