



Oregon CASA Network
400 Glenn Creek Rd NW #5030
Salem, OR 97304

www.oregonCASAnetwork.org

Subject: Oregon CASA Network Support for SB 1581, Universal Free School Meals

Date: February 6, 2026

To: Chair Frederick and Members of the Committee

From: Stephanie Brown, Oregon CASA Network

Chair Frederick and Members of the Committee,

For children with challenging home environments, school can be the most consistent place in their lives. SB 1581 matters because it strengthens that consistency in a simple, direct way: it ensures every student can count on nutritious meals at school, every day, without barriers or stigma. For children who have faced abuse or neglect, that predictability is not a convenience. It is stability.

Hunger is a learning barrier, full stop. When a child is worried about when they will eat next, it is harder to focus, regulate emotions, and participate in the classroom. Children who have faced abuse or neglect often carry the added weight of trauma, disrupted routines, and frequent transitions. Universal access to school meals removes one daily uncertainty and helps students concentrate on academics rather than basic survival needs.

Foster children are disproportionately likely to have experienced food insecurity before entering care, whether due to neglect, poverty, or household instability. Consistent school meals help counter risks associated with malnourishment, anemia, and other nutrition-related impacts that can slow growth and impair development. School is already where we ask students to show up ready to learn. SB 1581 helps make that expectation realistic.

Just as important, universal meals eliminate “meal shaming.” When eligibility is tied to individual forms, payment accounts, or visible identifiers, students can be singled out. Foster youth can already feel different. They often do not want attention drawn to their family circumstances, their placement, or their economic situation. Universal programs remove that stigma entirely and support an inclusive school climate where every student is treated the same.

SB 1581 is also a practical response to the reality of foster care transitions. Foster youth change placements, and therefore schools, more often than their peers. Each change can mean new paperwork, new accounts, and new gaps in access. Universal meals make access portable. No matter where a student lands, the meal is there. That is one less disruption in a life that may already be full of them.



Oregon CASA Network
400 Glenn Creek Rd NW #5030
Salem, OR 97304

www.oregonCASAnetwork.org

There is also a clear administrative benefit. Automatic access reduces the burden on schools and on caregivers who may be managing multiple urgent priorities during a placement change. It prevents children from “falling through the cracks” because a form was missed, delayed, or lost in the shuffle.

Finally, universal school meals provide tangible support to parents and caregivers who are operating within tight household budgets while trying to meet other immediate needs like clothing, school supplies, and extracurricular fees. Ensuring meals at school allows caregivers to redirect limited dollars to those critical needs that help children and youth feel safe, included, and able to thrive.

SB 1581 is a smart investment in students and a targeted support for children who face the steepest barriers to stability and success. Universal school meals are one of the most direct, proven ways to help children with difficult home lives show up ready to learn, feel included at school, and maintain continuity through disruptive transitions.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of SB 1581.