

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1238

As Reported by House Committee On:
Education

Title: An act relating to providing free school meals for all.

Brief Description: Providing free school meals for all.

Sponsors: Representatives Riccelli, Harris, Alvarado, Thai, Simmons, Senn, Rude, Reeves, Reed, Walen, Peterson, Ortiz-Self, Ormsby, Taylor, Leavitt, Fitzgibbon, Duerr, Doglio, Berry, Bateman, Morgan, Fey, Ramel, Goodman, Fosse, Pollet, Lekanoff, Macri, Chopp, Stonier, Gregerson and Santos; by request of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Education: 1/24/23, 2/7/23 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Requires school districts, beginning with the 2023-24 school year, to provide breakfast and lunch each school day to any requesting students and at no charge to the students.
- Makes the provision of meals at no charge to requesting students part of the state's statutory program of basic education, effective July 1, 2025.
- Requires all school districts, charter schools, and state-tribal compact schools to participate in federal school lunch and breakfast programs.
- Modifies funding provisions for the Learning Assistance Program and National Board Certification bonuses for the 2024-25 and 2025-26 school years.
- Directs the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to convene a work group to identify and examine impacts to state-funded education programs resulting from requirements obligating school districts to provide meals at no charge to requesting students.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 12 members: Representatives Santos, Chair; Shavers, Vice Chair; Rude, Ranking Minority Member; Bergquist, Callan, Eslick, Harris, Ortiz-Self, Pollet, Steele, Stonier and Timmons.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 1 member: Representative Sandlin.

Minority Report: Without recommendation. Signed by 2 members: Representatives McEntire, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; McClintock.

Staff: Ethan Moreno (786-7386).

Background:

Federal School Nutrition Programs, Free and Reduced-Price Meals.

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) are child nutrition programs funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (Department of Agriculture). The NSLP and the SBP are designed to promote the health and well-being of children by providing nutritionally balanced, low-cost or no-cost meals to children each school day. The NSLP and the SBP are administered in Washington by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), and both programs provide reimbursements to school districts for served meals that meet federal requirements.

Household applications submitted by families to schools are used to determine student eligibility for free or reduced-price meals (FRPMs). To qualify for free school meals, a student's family income must be at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL). Students whose families have an income between 130 percent and 185 percent of the FPL are eligible for reduced-price meals. Students whose families earn more than 185 percent of the FPL pay full price, but the meals are federally subsidized to some extent.

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act provides an alternative to household applications for FRPMs by allowing schools with high numbers of low-income students to serve free meals to all students. A school, group of schools, or school district is eligible for the CEP if at least 40 percent of its students are identified as eligible for free meals through means other than household applications.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (P.L. 116-127), federal legislation adopted in 2020 and subsequently extended, allowed states, through a waiver issued by the Department of Agriculture, to provide meals at no charge to all students, regardless of family income, though the 2021-22 school year. Federal provisions authorizing states to provide meals at no charge to all students during the school year have expired.

Program of Basic Education.

The state's program of basic education is defined in statute as that which is necessary to provide students with the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to meet state-established high school graduation requirements. Those requirements are intended to allow students to have the opportunity to graduate with a meaningful diploma that prepares them for postsecondary education, gainful employment, and citizenship.

The minimum components of the instructional program of basic education include multiple education requirements, student transportation requirements, and statewide salary allocations necessary to hire and retain qualified staff for the state's statutory program of basic education.

The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

In addition to its constitutional charge of supervising all matters pertaining to public schools, the Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) and its office have numerous and broad responsibilities prescribed in statute, including:

- making rules and regulations necessary for the administration of public education requirements;
- preparing courses of study and other materials and books for the discharge of education duties;
- fulfilling financial responsibilities, including distributing legislatively allocated funds to districts for the operation of the public school system, and awarding numerous state and federally funded grants; and
- satisfying numerous reporting and other duties assigned by the Legislature.

Learning Assistance Program.

The Learning Assistance Program (LAP) supports the provision of supplemental instruction and services for students who are not meeting academic standards, a term defined to mean students with the greatest academic deficits in basic skills as identified by statewide, school, or district assessments or other performance measurement tools.

The state provides two types of funding allocations for the LAP: a general LAP allocation, and an additional high poverty-based allocation for qualifying schools. School districts and schools qualify for one or both allocations based on prior years' percentages of students who qualify for FRPMs.

National Board Certification Bonuses.

Teachers and other certificated instructional staff (CIS) who have attained certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (National Board) are eligible for a state-funded bonus for each year they maintain the certification. A qualifying CIS who holds a valid certificate from the National Board for the duration of the 2022-23 school year will receive a bonus of \$6,019.

An additional state-funded annual bonus of \$5,000 is paid to each qualifying CIS with a

valid National Board certificate and an instructional assignment in a qualifying high poverty school. "High poverty schools" are designated in rule by the SPI and must meet threshold requirements for the percentage of students who are eligible for FRPMs.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

Providing All Public School Students with Access to Meals Served Without Charge.

Beginning with the 2023-24 school year, each school district, a term that includes charter schools and state-tribal compact schools, must provide breakfast and lunch each school day to any student who requests a breakfast, lunch, or both. The school district must provide the meals at no charge to the student and without consideration of the student's eligibility for a federally reimbursed FRPM. The provided meals must be nutritiously adequate and qualify for reimbursement under the NSLP or the SBP, and students are not eligible for more than one meal in a meal service period.

The obligation to provide meals at no charge to requesting students is made part of the state's statutory program of basic education, effective July 1, 2025.

Beginning with the 2023-24 school year, school districts are required to participate in the NSLP and the SBP and to continue collecting FRPM eligibility applications. The OSPI must reimburse school districts on a per-meal reimbursement basis for meals that are not already reimbursed at the Department of Agriculture free rate. The additional state reimbursement amount must be the difference between the Department of Agriculture's free rate and its paid rate.

The SPI must adopt and periodically revise rules to implement requirements obligating school districts to provide meals at no charge to requesting students. Until the 2025-26 school year, the SPI may exempt school districts from the requirements to provide meals at no charge to all requesting students if the district shows good cause for not being able to comply with the requirements.

School districts must continue collecting meal applications where applicable and run direct certification at least monthly. Additionally, school districts must annually monitor data for eligibility in the CEP and apply where eligible.

Related Provisions and Amendments.

Numerous changes are made to align statutory provisions with requirements obligating school districts to provide meals at no charge to requesting students. Examples include:

- changing various references to student eligibility FRPMs to students meeting federal eligibility requirements for FRPMs;
- providing that requirements to annually distribute and collect applications for determining eligibility for FRPMs do not apply to schools participating in the CEP;
- modifying provisions governing school and school district actions when a student

- cannot pay for a school meal or previously served meals; and
- deleting a reference to barriers that diminish access to FRPMs in provisions governing the development and implementation of a statewide electronic repository of household income information that is required for a student's enrollment in, or eligibility for, the NSLP, the SBP, or both programs.

Funding Related Provisions.

Learning Assistance Program. Funding provisions for the LAP are modified as follows for the 2024-25 and 2025-26 school years:

- General LAP allocations for school districts that do not participate in the Department of Agriculture's CEP must be based on the school district percentage of students who were eligible for FRPMs in school years 2019-20 through 2022-23 or the prior school year, whichever is greatest.
- For the high poverty-based allocation, a school not participating in the CEP continues to be eligible for the high poverty-based allocation if the school qualified during one year of the 2019-20 through 2022-23 school years, or in the prior school year.

National Board Certified Teacher Bonuses. For the 2024-25 and 2025-26 school years, a qualifying CIS is eligible for the high poverty schools annual bonus of \$5,000 if they are in an instructional assignment in a school that met the definition of high poverty school during the 2022-23 school year.

Funding Impacts Work Group.

The OSPI, by September 1, 2023, must convene a work group to identify and examine actual and potential impacts to education programs funded by the state, including the LAP, resulting from requirements obligating school districts to provide meals at no charge to requesting students. The work group must also recommend actions for avoiding or mitigating identified impacts. Staff support for the work group must be provided by the OSPI.

The work group must, at a minimum, include representatives of school districts and persons with relevant expertise in state-funded education programs. The work group must meet at least monthly and provide a report of findings and recommendations to the appropriate committees of the Legislature by June 30, 2024.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill changes the original bill by:

- requiring all school districts, charter schools, and state-tribal compact schools, beginning with the 2023-24 school year, to participate in federal school lunch and breakfast programs;
- delaying making the meal provision requirements part of the state's program of basic education until July 1, 2025;
- assigning the duty to provide meals without charge to requesting students to school

- districts instead of public schools;
- preventing the obligation to provide meals without charge to requesting students during the school year from lapsing if federal reimbursement funds are eliminated;
- specifying that the requirement to annually distribute and collect applications to determine whether a student meets federal eligibility requirements for FRPMs does not apply to schools participating in the federal CEP;
- making references to the United States Department of Agriculture's school lunch program consistent;
- making formatting and other conforming changes, including changing a reference to "local education agencies" to "school districts," correcting an erroneous cross reference, and modifying the Part 4 heading name;
- removing an unnecessary definition of "public school";
- adding a short title; and
- modifying intent language by specifying that the policy is intended to be implemented without adversely "or otherwise" impacting programs that use FRPM eligibility for determining program eligibility, distributing financial resources, or both.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Preliminary fiscal note available.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: The bill contains multiple effective dates. Please see the bill.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) Food is health. Providing free school meals is the most effective way to ensure that kids get the food they need to thrive. About 700,000 students have benefited in Washington from recent changes to meal program participation requirements, but the Legislature should not stop there. The pandemic showed us that schools can feed all children and reduce hunger.

The federal income requirements for free and reduced-price meals do not vary within the state, so families earning \$52,000 must pay student meal costs. School meal costs are significant for families just above the income eligibility requirements.

This bill is a good idea that recognizes current circumstances and the long hours that kids spend at schools. Children cannot learn effectively when they are hungry. Policymakers should ensure that all Washington students have the nutrition they need and the meals they deserve.

Families experience hardships, and this bill will help. Students should not be burdened by the circumstances of their parents. This bill addresses an equity issue and will allow school

meal staff to focus on meal preparation, not operating cash registers.

The bill creates a work group to identify issues resulting from the provision of no-charge meals to students, and this will be helpful for stakeholders.

Healthy meals are foundational to learning. The universal meals program that started during the COVID-19 pandemic was very successful and more students received school meals. Students had more time for meals and socialization when they no longer navigated a payment system. The bill addresses funding around the Learning Assistance Program and this is appreciated.

Surveys by the State Board of Education indicate that elementary school students support free meals for all. This bill will support the whole child and provide adequate nutrition for intellectual development.

Less than half of qualifying students are participating in free meals. When students dine together, they are building community. The law compels students to attend school and should compel districts to feed students. Free meals stigma is real, especially with middle and high school students.

Child hunger is a real problem with widespread impacts. Children who are hungry are more likely to be truant, have academic difficulties, and repeat a grade. This bill is not about helping students and families that don't need supports, it's about helping those that do. Children who are hungry carry a stigma and a hunger in their belly, but this bill can help with both of those issues.

(Opposed) Schools are partners with communities and parents and schools need to stay in their own lane. Parents are responsible for feeding children, not schools. We have options to feed children if parents cannot do so. This bill undermines the goal of creating independent, self-reliant children. Kids that need food are being fed, it's not the role of the state to feed them.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Marcus Riccelli, prime sponsor; Michael Moran, Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation; Aracely Calvillo, Save the Children Action Network; Logan Endres and Madhumitha Gandhi, Washington State School Directors' Association; Lelach Rave, Washington Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics; Randy Spaulding, Washington State Board of Education; Liza Rankin, Seattle Public Schools; Roni Cook, Washington Education Association; Ben Atkinson, Washington State Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics; Mikhail Cherniske, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction; and Patrick Durgan, Bellingham Public Schools.

(Opposed) Jason Perrins, Chewelah School District.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: Andrea Davis, Coordinated Care; Natalie Estrada; Ben Mitchell, Foundation for Tacoma Students; Karen Brown, Franklin Pierce School District; Alicia Busch, Maple Valley Food Bank; June Ivers, Seattle Council Parent Teacher Student Association.