

February 24, 2025

Dear Members of the Oregon House Education Committee,

The Chef Ann Foundation calls upon the Oregon State Legislature to support the HB 3435 - School Meals for All legislation. The Chef Ann Foundation is a national non-profit dedicated to promoting whole-ingredient, scratch cooking in schools. Scratch cooking enables schools to serve the healthiest, tastiest meals so that kids are well-nourished and ready to learn. We believe every child deserves access to fresh, nutritious meals that fuel their ability to learn, grow, and thrive – regardless of their family’s income. Oregon has an opportunity to take a bold step, in line with our counterparts in California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont toward food equity, health, academic success, and sustainability by ensuring that all students receive the nourishment they need to reach their full potential.

According to a study by Feeding America, right now, 1 in 6 children in Oregon face food insecurity, meaning they don’t consistently have enough nutritious food to eat. Research shows that students who eat regular, healthy school meals consume more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, which are essential for preventing childhood obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related diseases. According to a study by Localio et al. (2024) universal free meal programs reduce childhood obesity rates by 17% and help lower cholesterol and blood pressure levels, setting kids up for a lifetime of better health.

Healthy School Meals for All also supports a more sustainable food system. Schools that participate in universal meal programs have greater flexibility to source more local and organic ingredients, supporting Oregon’s farmers and ranchers. Scratch cooked meals– which become more feasible with increased meal participation– help cut down on processed foods, which require more

energy-intensive production and packaging. Additionally, research shows that plant-forward school meals can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by up to 50% compared to highly processed alternatives. By passing this bill, Oregon can help tackle both childhood nutrition insecurity and climate change—two of the most pressing challenges of our time.

States that have implemented universal meal programs have seen powerful results including:

- Increased participation in school meals, leading to better nutrition across all income levels.
- Reduced stigma, so that children are not singled out based on their ability to pay.
- Improved academic outcomes, providing students with a better ability to concentrate, retain information and succeed in the classroom.
- Stronger school meal programs, with more resources to invest in fresh, scratch-cooked meals and local ingredients.
- Environmental benefits, as plant-forward and locally sourced meals help reduce food waste and carbon footprints.

Lastly, universal school meals not only benefits students but also strengthens and expands the school food workforce, creating more stable and well-supported jobs for nutrition professionals. The School Nutrition Association reports that when all students receive meals, schools experience higher participation rates, leading to increased funding and resources for kitchen staff, food service workers and culinary training programs. This allows districts to invest more in scratch cooking and locally sourced ingredients, which requires skilled labor and additional staff, creating new job opportunities.

Eighty-four percent of Oregon voters already support state spending on school meals. This bill is a critical investment in Oregon's future. It ensures that no child falls through the cracks, no family has to choose between groceries and other necessities, and no school nutrition team has to chase

down unpaid meal debt. Additionally, by prioritizing local and sustainable sourcing, Oregon can lead the way in building a healthier food system for both children and the planet.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mara Fleishman".

Mara Fleishman

Chief Executive Officer, Chef Ann Foundation

References

1. Feeding America. (n.d.). *Oregon*. Feeding America. Retrieved February 24, 2025, from <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/oregon>
2. Localio, A. M., Knox, M. A., Basu, A., Lindman, T., Walkinshaw, L. P., & Jones-Smith, J. C. (2024). Universal Free School Meals Policy and Childhood Obesity. *Pediatrics*, 153(4), e2023063749. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2023-063749>
3. Benton, T. G., Bieg, C., Harwatt, H., Pudasaini, R., & Wellesley, L. (2021). *Food system impacts on biodiversity loss*. Chatham House. https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/2021-02-03-food-system-biodiversity-loss-benton-et-al_0.pdf
4. School Nutrition Association. (n.d.). *School meal statistics*. School Nutrition Association. Retrieved February 24, 2025, from <https://schoolnutrition.org/about-school-meals/school-meal-statistics/>