

Legislature urged to adopt permanent school meals program

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Dozens of superintendents, including a handful from Franklin County and the North Quabbin region, have signed a letter to lawmakers urging them to make permanent the universal meals program School Meals for All, rather than just extend it for another year.

“Being a rural school district, we do have some significant levels of poverty. We know that with poverty often comes food instability,” said Sheryl Stanton, superintendent of the Mohawk Trail and Hawlemont regional school districts. “We know that if children are feeling hungry, then they’re not available for learning.”

More than 80 superintendents from across Massachusetts signed the letter, which was circulated last week by anti-hunger group Project Bread. The letter urges lawmakers to embrace a House plan that would weave authorization for the meals program into the fiscal year 2024 budget.

“Last year, the Legislature made the wise investment to extend school meals through the current school year in the FY2023 budget,” the letter reads. “Because of this extension, an additional 80,000 students ate lunch in October 2022, compared to October 2019 in schools not previously serving universal free meals. In other words, by investing, the Legislature has been successful in decreasing food insecurity, improving health and improving education outcomes.”

Further, in 2019, 24% of food-insecure children were ineligible to receive free or reduced-price school meals in the traditional meal system, according to the letter.

“We want to make sure we’re removing all barriers to learning and that includes student nutrition,” Stanton said.

Others who signed the letter include Warwick School District Superintendent Carole Learned-Miller and Athol-Royalston Regional School District Superintendent Matthew Ehrenworth.

“Hunger makes it difficult, if not impossible, for students to concentrate and learn,” said Learned-Miller. “And, like so many other hardships, food insecurity disproportionately impacts families from historically marginalized groups such as low-income families and families of color.”

Learned-Miller said that with universal free lunch funding, educators can focus resources on providing high-quality meals for children.

“In Warwick, we are working with a local chef, Gail Beauregard, to provide a farm-to-table menu that centers local meats, cheeses and vegetables as well as whole grains,” Learned-Miller said of the new independent school district. “Her track record has shown that such menus result in a huge increase of students taking and eating school lunch. ... This approach ensures all students are well-fed and ready to learn, and that they develop a lifelong habit of healthy eating.”

Beacon Hill officials broadly agree on a desire to keep offering free meals, but have taken different approaches, reported the State House News Service. The House moved to make it

permanent in the FY24 budget with \$161 million in funding from the new surtax on higher earners. However, the Senate and Gov. Maura Healey did not include the measure or the money in their annual budget proposals and instead have suggested extending the program for another year in a standalone bill.

A conference committee tasked with privately negotiating a final annual budget will decide whether to embrace the House's plan.

Stanton noted that the universal meals program helps reduce stigma around the free and reduced meals program.

“There is a stigma sometimes for families to enroll and share information, which limits students’ access to resources such as free and reduced lunch,” she explained. “And there is sometimes some stigma as students receive lunch that some students are paying for or buying, and other students are receiving free or reduced lunch.”

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