

Politics and Government

Legislature primed to serve up lunch money for Minnesota students

Brian Bakst St. Paul March 14, 2023 2:10 PM



Free school meals for all Minnesota students are closer to reality following a Minnesota Senate vote Tuesday that would use part of the state's budget surplus to cover a basic breakfast and lunch each day.

Ben Hovland | MPR News

Free school meals for all Minnesota students are closer to reality following a Minnesota Senate vote Tuesday that would use part of the state's budget surplus to cover a basic breakfast and lunch each day.

The Senate's 38-26 vote, which was bipartisan, sends the bill back to the House where a slightly different version passed about a month ago. It would cost the state \$387 million in the first two years and that price tag would grow in the future.

Sen. Heather Gustafson, DFL-Vadnais Heights, said the proposal will save families money and ensure children have nutrition in school settings.

"Look at it like a lunchbox tax cut. It gives money back to families," she said. "But let's put all that aside. Besides the healthy meals and giving money back to families, feeding kids at school is the right thing to do."

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Sen. Michael Kreun, R-Blaine, said families with comfortable incomes will benefit the most because those lower on the economic ladder might already qualify for subsidized meals.

"This is not a tax relief bill," Kreun said. "For every family that receives relief under this bill, some other family is paying for it."

The free meals wouldn't include a la carte purchases offered in many school cafeterias. Second helpings would also remain the duty of families to cover.

Republicans tried unsuccessfully to impose an income cap or redirect the money to other educational purposes.

"We don't have a disagreement when it comes to feeding kids. We have a difference of opinion regarding the priority of funding when it comes to our schools," said Sen. Zach Duckworth, R-Lakeville, who was one of four Republicans to eventually vote for the bill.

Democrats said the bill would lift a paperwork burden on school districts who now have to obtain proof that a child qualifies. They said lunch debt is on the rise, and they argued income is not always a good indicator of students' ability to access nutrition at school.

"We should not make children go hungry because of paperwork," said Sen. Nicole Mitchell, DFL-Woodbury. "We need to set our children up for success and that means them

having full bellies and being in an environment where they can learn.”

The Senate bill contains a clause not in the House version that aims to hold school districts harmless for other aid they get for students in free-and-reduced lunch programs. With a shift away from that measurement, some district leaders worried their connected allowances would fall, too.

Lawmakers would still have to make other changes this year to safeguard district budgets. The DFL-controlled House and Senate are considering a sizable bump to the per-student education formula and potentially linking that to inflation. But the broader education budget is weeks from taking shape.

By isolating the school lunch bill, lawmakers are highlighting efforts to combat food insecurity.

The Hunger-Free Schools Coalition – a group of nonprofits, public health entities and corporations – told lawmakers in a letter that a quarter of students experience some level of food insecurity.

“School breakfast and lunch can account for more than half a child’s daily calories, providing sustenance they may not have reliable access to at home,” the group wrote ahead of the Senate vote. “School meals also help establish lifelong healthy eating habits and can reduce the likelihood of chronic conditions like diabetes and health disease developing later in life.”

The bill replicates a program that was in place during the pandemic that has now lapsed.

Sen. Andrew Mathews, R-Milaca, labeled it “the latest example of socialism.”

“This is another example of government treating all kids the same and it’s not going to accomplish the objective it’s seeking to do,” he said.

In recent years, the Legislature has passed bills outlawing what’s known as lunch shaming, where children are denied a meal or given a substitute that could make their family financial struggles apparent.

“We don’t even know all the students who are hungry. Let’s just get this done and make sure it’s universal and everyone can get the meals they need at school,” said Sen. Clare Oumou Verbeten, DFL-St. Paul, adding, “Today we have an opportunity to step up as a state.”

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