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## Bill to provide free school meals heads to governor's desk

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The House of Representatives voted unanimously Sunday night to pass a bill to provide free breakfast and lunch to all New Mexico public school students — regardless of their economic standing.

Senate Bill 4 is now on its way to the desk of Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, who is expected to sign it. Lujan Grisham made providing free lunches to all students a priority of hers in this year's 60-day legislative session.

She first brought the idea up during a convention on public health policy in Philadelphia late last year.

"Universal free breakfast and lunch will take the focus off of our children's stomachs and place it on their studies, where they belong," Sen. Michael Padilla, D-Albuquerque, who introduced the bill, said in an interview after the vote.

That's a point educators and child advocates have been making for years — that a hungry child can't learn because of an empty stomach.

SB 4 also encourages districts to prepare healthier meals for children and to work with local farmers and producers to provide food. Schools that choose to offer healthier meals will receive more funding.

The bill comes with a \$22.5 million appropriation that is within House Bill 2, the state budget bill.

Some Republicans who supported the bill questioned whether that was enough money to feed the state's 300,000-plus public school students and help school kitchens adapt to providing healthier meals. During the debate, Rep. Greg Nibert, R-Roswell, called the money "a drop in the bucket."

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compared to what I believe our schools and school districts are going to need to accomplish the goals of this legislation.”

Nibert said lawmakers will have to “aggressively” address providing more funding for school meals in the future, adding he doubted the \$22.5 million would be enough to help just Albuquerque Public Schools implement the program.

SB 4 sets up an incentive grant program to schools that meet quality standards to purchase and provide New Mexico-grown, raised or processed food products.

The legislation also encourages doing away with food waste by requiring elementary school students be given enough eating time to finish their meals and by collecting unused food for food pantries, students to take home or charitable entities.

Almost three-quarters of New Mexico students already receive free and reduced-price lunches, according to the Kids Count Data Center — one of the highest rates in the country.

The national nonprofit Feeding America estimates one in five children in New Mexico face hunger problems.

## Robert Nott

General Assignment Reporter

Robert Nott has covered education and youth issues for the Santa Fe New Mexican. He is assigned to The New Mexican's city desk where he covers a general assignment beat.