

# Ohio school students would get free breakfast, lunch under Senate bill

By **Donovan Hunt**  
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A bipartisan bill in the Ohio Senate would give free meals to K-12 students in public and non-public chartered schools.

Sen. Bill Blessing, R-Colerain Twp, said funding school meals would:

- Improve truancy rates because students would be more likely to attend if they get a free meal.
- Improve student attention because less would be hungry during class.
- Eliminate stigmas surrounding students who currently get free meals.
- Give significant financial relief to families.

"If we're serious about supporting families in this state, this is a no-brainer," he said.

This is the second time Blessing and Sen. Kent Smith, D-Euclid, have sponsored legislation together that would give students free meals.

Blessing said the ultimate goal of SB 109 is to add this funding to the state's biannual budget which must be finalized by June 31. The budget is currently being discussed in the House and Blessing said he wants to add this funding to it once it reaches the Senate.

Meals would be paid for by reimbursements from the Department of Education and Workforce in this bill. It lists a \$300 million appropriation from the general revenue fund to pay for those.

Polling in May 2024 conducted by The Tarrance Group found that about two-thirds of Ohioans support universal free school meal programs. One in five students are food insecure in Ohio — over 400,000 children — according to groups like Solving Hunger Ohio and the Children's Hunger Alliance.

Cynthia Rees, state director of Council for a Strong America Ohio, said the average savings for a family of four would be between \$1,000 and \$1,200 per child

Blessing said he has heard feedback from constituents worried their property taxes would rise from offering free meals, but that is not how he intends to fund the program.

Instead, Blessing said there are ample ways to fund this program including reforms to the business income tax deductions, which was a proposal from the

last bill he and Smith introduced for free school meals. This funding is small in the scheme of state budgets that have risen above \$100 billion, he said.

Other struggles to fund this program could come if a large tax decrease is included in the budget, which Blessing said there is an appetite for among lawmakers. He pointed to SB 3, a proposal that would phase down non-business income taxes to 2.75% over the next two years decreasing state revenue significantly as an example.

## **COVID-era free lunch**

Federal relief funds during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed states to fund free meal programs. Free lunch ended during the 2022-2023 school year and Gov. Mike DeWine previously questioned if Ohio tax dollars should continue this policy.

Eight states, California, New Mexico, Nevada, Colorado, Minnesota, Michigan, Vermont, Massachusetts and Maine, have used their own funds to pay for permanent free universal school lunch once COVID money dried up. Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, a Republican, signed a bill on Feb. 20 giving students free school breakfast, which passed through both Arkansas chambers with strong bipartisan support.

Thomas Schatz, president of Citizens Against Government Waste, said the Ohio Legislature's job will be to balance any benefits from free universal meals with its cost. Any increase in business taxes for these programs seems unusual for a fiscally conservative state, he said.

"It's a question of resources, it's a question of priorities," he said. "In 2023 half of the public school students already qualify for free or reduced-price school meals, so I think it's a question of what the state can afford."