

Free school meals for all: Ohio coalition requests \$300 million in state budget

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COLUMBUS, Ohio - A coalition of anti-hunger advocates and students is calling for the Ohio General Assembly to pay for universal free school meals in the budget.

Hunger-Free Schools Ohio began organizing two years ago, during the last state budget cycle, for the legislature to better fund school breakfasts and lunches. Hunger-Free Schools Ohio is a coalition of over 50 organizations, including the Ohio Children's Hospital Association, Kroger Co. and CVS Health, all dedicated to ending childhood hunger by ensuring all students have access to nutritious school meals.

This year's ask from the coalition would cost \$300 million a year to pay for both breakfast and lunch for students in public, private and charter schools that participate in the school lunch and breakfast programs, it announced during a Tuesday morning press conference.

If the legislature balks at the price tag, the coalition proposes to fund just universal breakfasts, said Cyndy Rees, executive director of the Council for a Strong Ohio and member of the anti-hunger coalition. That would cost about \$50 million a year.

The request comes as the state, while still operating in the black, hasn't recently met tax revenue projections. That, coupled with the loss of federal COVID-19 funds, has resulted in a tighter budget bill this year. In fact, if the legislature adopts Gov. Mike DeWine's budget recommendations, [schools will see \\$103 million](#) in cuts over the next two years.

"It's an uphill battle, for sure, but to be honest with you, if you really think about it, it isn't extraordinary. We haven't been feeding our kids," Rees said. "How many of us go to meetings for our work and there's always a box lunch?"

In the Ohio Senate, [a bipartisan bill](#) to provide universal free meals would cost around \$297 million a year, said sponsor state Sen. Louis "Bill" Blessing, a Cincinnati-area Republican.

When considering the billions in the state budget, the meal cost “really isn’t all that much money in the grand scheme of things,” Blessing said. It’s a matter of choices. Do we do that? Or do we do an income tax cut? I would be much more in favor of that than I would be of an income tax cut.”

John Fortney, a spokesman for Ohio Senate President Rob McColley, didn’t say whether McColley supported universal free meals or the bipartisan bill.

“School meals are a topic for operating budget discussions,” Fortney said.

The operating budget bill currently is being debated in the Ohio House. Once it passes that chamber, it will move to the Ohio Senate.

In the last two-year state operating budget, lawmakers directed \$26.3 million over the biennium for school meals. This allowed students who were eligible for reduced-price meals to get them for free, Fortney said.

“Ohio made significant increases in expanding funding for school meal programs in the current budget recognizing the importance of nutrition for children, and that will continue to be a topic in developing Ohio’s next two-year budget that is already underway,” he said.

This year, DeWine is urging every school district to apply for the [Community Eligibility Provision](#). That’s a federal program in which each student in a school gets free meals if at least 25% of the students come from families with incomes at or below the federal poverty level, which is \$32,150 for family of four.

Schools with the Community Eligibility Provision get [federal government reimbursements](#) for meals, which can be up to \$4.69 per lunch and up to \$2.84 per breakfast. The higher the poverty rate is, the more federal funds are available.

The state reimbursement is \$0.30 per breakfast and \$0.40 per lunch, regardless of poverty levels.

Some schools meet the 25% threshold, but don’t apply for the Community Eligibility Provision because their poverty rate isn’t high enough to get significant U.S. Department of Agriculture reimbursements, which leaves them on the hook to cover the remaining cost of free meals, Rees said.

That’s why the \$300 million annual state funding would help, she said.

Hunger-Free Schools Ohio is encouraged that the governor wants all schools to apply for the Community Eligibility Provision. But Deanne Kelbley, Lorain County's Amherst Exempted Village Schools' nutrition services supervisor, said it doesn't go far enough.

"For many children, school breakfast and lunch are the only consistent nutritious meals that they receive," Kelbley said. "I have seen students rush in the cafeteria on Monday morning, sometimes not having eaten all weekend, just so they can come get breakfast. I watch kids actually pack away food in their backpacks to take home later."

Without the distraction of hunger, students behave and perform better in class. Giving everyone free meals would take away the stigma lower-income students face, coalition members said.

Several students spoke in favor of universal free school meals.

CJ Eaton, a junior at Antwerp High School in Paulding County, said the issue is personal. His mother entered the workforce late last year, and he lost his free lunch eligibility.

"Unfortunately, even with both of my parents working, as is the case for many Ohio families, money is still tight," he said.

Georgianna Damschroder, a student at Lima Shawnee High School in Allen County, said she's watched friends skip meals during the day, so they have enough money for other expenses.

"As I walk through the school cafeteria with one of my good friends, I grab my full tray of food. He grabs just a bag of chips. I ask him if he wants anything more and he replies, 'I'm not that hungry,'" said Connor Morrison, a senior at Olentangy Orange High School in Delaware County. "My friend is one of the students across Ohio and across the nation who struggle to pay for a school meal every day. School meals are more important than you can imagine. Hungry kids can't learn."