

Massachusetts Gov. Baker signs student nutrition act ensuring more students access free meals at school

Today, Governor Charlie Baker, Lt. Governor Karyn Polito and Secretary of Education James Peyser joined lawmakers to participate in a ceremonial bill signing for An Act Promoting Student Nutrition (H 3999) which increases students' access to free school meals and prohibits schools from using any punitive measures against students with meal debt. The legislation requires any school or district to implement universal free breakfast and lunch for all students if a majority of its the students meet low-income criteria.

"This legislation is another way we can ensure all children in the Commonwealth have access to healthy meals when they are in school," said Governor Charlie Baker. "We are thankful to our partners in the Legislature for their leadership on this important issue so that no child goes hungry and can focus on their learning and education."

"This bill will end the undue burden on students whose families have school meal debt by preventing children from being involved," said Lt. Governor Karyn Polito. "No child should be involved in debt collection or made to feel uncomfortable when they go to eat lunch at school."

"As a state, we simply cannot accept hungry students as part of our reality. Students who don't get enough to eat every single day face very real disadvantages as compared to their peers," said Senate President Karen Spilka. "This legislation ensures that students across the Commonwealth have equitable access to nutrition to ensure that they start every day ready

to learn. I'd like to thank Senate Majority Leader Cindy Creem for her leadership on this bill, and to the Legislature and Governor Baker for acknowledging that supporting our students through accessible meals, rather than shaming families for their inability to pay, is the best path towards success for all of our students."

"Addressing food insecurity, especially among our state's most vulnerable students so they are able to learn and succeed in school, is a top priority for the Massachusetts House of Representatives," said Speaker of the House Ronald J. Mariano. "I would like to thank Chair Alice Peisch and Representative Andy Vargas for their leadership and hard work in extending access to meals and working to end hunger in our schools."

"School meals are critical to students' health and well-being," said Secretary of Education James Peyser. "This new law will expand access to free school meals to ensure thousands of additional students have access to healthy meals every day so they can learn and grow to their full potential."

The legislation also requires school districts that participate in the national school lunch program to take steps to maximize federal revenue resources and savings for families and directs the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to assist districts in improving direct certification for its students. It also allows school districts to certify children for free or reduced-priced meals for up to four consecutive school years.

In addition, school districts will be required to determine whether a student with unpaid meal debt is eligible for free or reduced-priced meals within 30 days of notification of the debt. During that 30-day window, students can still access meals until it is determined whether the family is eligible for free or reduced meals. School employees are now prohibited in any way from publicly identifying a student with meal debt; denying a student a meal; disposing of a student's meal; or

serving a student an alternative meal because of debt.