

Senate Education Committee

Peter Mulvey 271-4063

HB 572-FN, relative to eligibility for free school meals.

Hearing Date: April 11, 2023

Time Opened: 10:00 a.m.

Time Closed: 10:58 a.m.

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Ward, Gendreau, Lang, Prentiss and Fenton

Members of the Committee Absent : None

Bill Analysis: This bill increases the eligibility for free school meals to household incomes up to 300 percent of federal poverty guidelines, and provides funding from the education trust fund for the additional costs.

Sponsors:

Rep. Hall

Rep. Cascadden

Rep. Ellison

Rep. M. Murray

Rep. Burroughs

Rep. Woodcock

Rep. Rombeau

Rep. Myler

Rep. Cornell

Rep. Tanner

Who supports the bill: 150 individuals signed in support of HB 572. For a copy of the sign-in sheet, contact legislative aide Pete D. Mulvey (peter.mulvey@leg.state.nh.us).

Who opposes the bill: Seven individuals signed in opposition to HB 572. For a copy of the sign-in sheet, contact legislative aide Pete D. Mulvey (peter.mulvey@leg.state.nh.us).

Who is neutral on the bill: Melissa White (*Department of Education*). For a copy of the sign-in sheet, contact legislative aide Pete D. Mulvey (peter.mulvey@leg.state.nh.us).

Summary of testimony presented:

Representative Muriel Hall

Merrimack - District 9

- Rep. Hall shared that HB 572, which related to the eligibility for free and reduced meals, was the product of extensive interim study work among community stakeholders.
- HB 572 passed 12-8 in the House Education Committee, and subsequently passed the full house.
- The intent of HB 572 was to help support a wider range of lower income families by raising the free and reduced meal's income eligibility cap to 300% of the federal poverty

level, and to provide funds with a federal reimbursement program combined with a supplemental state fund.

- Food insecurity put unbelievable stress on families, which had been exacerbated in recent years due to food price hikes and utility hikes.
- HB 572 would ensure that the most vulnerable received at least one, and when possible, two nutritious meals per day.
- Rep. Hall asserted that no child should go hungry due to circumstance beyond their control.
- School meals played a critical role in the attendance, well-being, and academic success of students.
- During the House Education hearing, a superintendent testified that the toughest decision they had to make was cancelling school. School cancellation was a particularly difficult decision because closure meant some children would go hungry that day.
- In the view of Rep. Hall, the State had an obligation to end child hunger. Taxpayers paid for books, computers, therefore food should not be considered too much.
- Rep. Hall urged the committee to consider HB 572 ought to pass.

Jacqueline Coe

Superintendent, SAU 24

- SAU 24 had been engaged with universal design for learning, (*UDL*).
- UDL designed the learning environment to meet the multitude of unique necessities in classrooms.
- Ms. Coe believed that accommodations in place for a specific student helped all students.
- Universal school lunch positively impacted all SAU 24 student.
- Ms. Coe shared strong support toward any effort which sought to increase eligibility and participation in school meal programs.
- Ms. Coe took a moment to assert that menstrual hygiene product provision was an equity issue comparable to free and reduced meals, and assured the committee that the district was more than capable of mitigating any behavioral issues without assistance from the State.
- Sen. Lang asked how many additional students would be eligible based on an increased eligibility cap.
 - Ms. Coe said that currently, out of 2,000 students, approximately 20-25% were eligible, therefore more than half would likely be eligible under the proposed 300% poverty-level income cap.
- Sen. Lang asked what it would cost to feed 500 children vs 1,000.
 - Ms. Coe said the meals were federally reimbursed, so those expenditures weren't figures she was familiar with.

Megan Tuttle,

President, NEA NH

- Ms. Tuttle indicated strong support for HB 572.
- Ms. Tuttle concurred in the belief that well fed children learned more.
- HB 572 would increase the number of qualified children.

- School meals were sometimes the only meals children could count on. Ms. Tuttle referenced the popularity of weekend wagon programs, and *'End 68 Hours of Hunger'*.

Eileen Liponis

Executive Director, N.H Food Bank

- Ms. Liponis was in strong support of HB 572.
- There had been tremendous strain over the last three years for food aid groups.
- The N.H Food Bank was the only food bank in the state.
- In 2022, the food bank distributed 17 million pounds of food, compared to 13 million pounds pre-COVID.
- According to Ms. Liponis, the food bank and its associated agencies were heavily strained with no relief in sight.
- HB 572 would provide a much-needed addition to the flow of available food in the State.
- Ms. Liponis emphasized that HB 572 was also about normalizing socialization around food. HB 572 would bring children together over food, eliminating stigma and shame.
- During COVID in 2020, the food bank operated three mobile food pantries a week. In 2021 that was reduced to two a week, and further reduced to one mobile food pantry a week in 2022. Prior to COVID, the Food Bank would operate approximately six mobile units for the entire year according to Ms. Liponis.
- Ms. Liponis believed the increased and sustained volume was likely to remain.
- One family in Gorham shared with Ms. Liponis that their SNAP benefit decreased from \$875 a month to \$275 a month.
- Five women had told Ms. Liponis that they had given up protein as a cost saving measure.
- Ms. Liponis said that many individuals had given up their pets as they could no longer afford to feed them.
- The summer meals program had tripled, with the meals being produced by the food bank kitchens increasing to 6,000 a week from an initial rate of 2,500 a week.
- Ms. Liponis calculated that for the 162,000 students in the State, they all could be fed one meal a day for \$500,000.

Mike Apfelberg

President, United Way of Greater Nashua (UWGN)

- UWGN partnered with local schools to improve food access.
- Share carts had been implemented in schools to share uneaten food, safely.
- UWGN had worked to create a coupon system to enable food access for those ineligible for free meals, yet who still had difficulty affording adequate nutrition.
- HB 572 would effectively eliminate the category for reduced meals by increasing the eligibility for access to free meals. No student would go without food during a school day.
- Mr. Apfelberg asked the committee to consider how well they could learn and sustain physical activity while hungry.
- Considering increased costs for fuel, housing, healthcare, transportation, it would not be advantageous for the state to cultivate an environment where children were not sufficiently fed.

- Mr. Apfelberg asserted that evident disparate educational outcomes were proof of the State's nutritional assistance systems being insufficient.

Sean Parr

Manchester School Board

- Mr. Parr, on behalf of the board, spoke in support of HB 572.
- The expansion as proposed would ensure nutritional support for children and families who struggled with persisting economic pressures.
- Access to nutritious meals provided for greater stability for those in need and would produce beneficial academic outcomes.
- The Manchester school board was unanimous in its support for increasing income eligibility for free and reduced meals to 300% of the federal poverty level.

Debra Howes

President, AFT N.H

- Ms. Howes strongly supported HB 572.
- A persistently hungry student would not be available to learn effectively according to Ms. Howes.
- Basic needs had to be met to enable learning.
- Ms. Howes shared that there were fewer behavioral issues in well-fed children.
- Ms. Howes strongly urged the Committee to consider HB 572 OTP.

Nancy Vaughan

Government Relations Director, N.H Heart Association

- Ms. Vaughan was in strong support of HB 572.
- Ms. Vaughan offered written testimony and evidence behind the efficacy of accessible school meals.
- School meals had been far more nutritious since the updated 2012 guidelines, contrary to popular belief.
- Ms. Vaughan emphasized that there were children right above the income eligibility who came to school hungry.
- Children who performed better in school were more likely to become productive adults.
- The American Heart Association promoted equity in nutrition security and believed HB 572 contributed greatly to that goal.

Jessica Gorhan

N.H Hunger Solutions

- Ms. Gorhan offered the committee data and fact sheets to provide evidence for the efficacy of accessible meals in school.
- Ms. Gorhan read a letter from a school lunch staffer whose child received free and reduced meals.

- Ms. Tricia LaBelle supported HB 572 as a parent of a child on free and reduced meals.
- Ms. LaBelle believed that parental stress trickled down to children.
- Students in Ms. LaBelle's district were not denied hot lunch no matter their balance.
- Ms. LaBelle believed that children today had far more to worry about than children had historically.
- HB 572 reached some of the most vulnerable demographics; those who earned too much to qualify, but too little to survive.
- HB 572 would help children the most out of anybody. The current guidelines were not appropriate in Ms. LaBelle's view.
- A marginal annual contract increase could put Ms. LaBelle in an income bracket that would disqualify her child from receiving free meals and would put Ms. LaBelle in a position where attending to expenses would be even more difficult.
- Ms. LaBelle believed that the current guidelines revealed to families that they needed to work harder if they wanted to afford life's necessities.

Aubrey Freedman

- Mr. Freedman spoke in opposition to HB 572.
- Mr. Freedman shared that under the new eligibility guidelines, a family of four earning \$90,000 would be eligible for free meals.
- Mr. Freedman believed the improved eligibility included the middle class, contrary to the program's target demographic during its inception in the 1940s.
- Inclusion of the middle class would increase dependency on the state, which Mr. Freedman asserted to be the worst aspect of HB 572.
- Mr. Freedman emphasized that it was a parent's sole responsibility to feed their child, not taxpayers.
- The program would not be free; the federal government only considered those within 185% of the poverty line to be eligible. The difference would be paid for by N.H taxpayers according to Mr. Freedman.
- HB 572 would create a new state program, that would result in extra costs for administration and staff.
- Mr. Freedman believed that considering the processed nature of school food, there was no guarantee that improved access to hot lunch for students would effectively combat childhood obesity.
- Sen. Lang noted that it cost \$21,000 to educate a child in the State and asked if an extra \$480 per student offered enough of a return on investment through improved proficiency metrics to justify the increased income for eligibility.
 - Mr. Freedman said historically marginal increases in expenditures were argued to improve outcomes, and that overtime the increased expenditures cumulated to be far too great.
 - Mr. Freedman added that proficiency metrics in SAU 4 were abysmal and said that modelling to children the concept of goods and services being free of charge was the wrong idea.

Melissa White

Division Director, Learning Support, Department of Education

- Ms. White offered to field questions from the Committee.
- Ms. White provided an information sheet containing data from the 2018-19 school year, and the 2021-2022 school year.
- The cost for HB 572 was indeterminable since predicting the amount of qualified students was not possible.
 - Given recent census data and poverty rates, 300% of the poverty level would be an income of \$90,000 for a family of four.
 - The median household income in the state was \$83,449. Ms. White shared that 60% of households fell into the median category.
 - It was difficult to determine how many students would qualify.
- Figures for the anticipated cost of covering reduced meal eligible students were available.
 - There were 5,197 students were eligible for reduced lunch in the State, with a \$0.40 cost per meal.
 - It would cost \$375,000 to provide free lunch for students eligible for reduced meals.
- Sen. Lang asked if the state would be supplanting the federal free and reduced lunch program by putting in statute the State's obligation to absorb the entire cost.
 - Ms. White said she did not believe the State's requirements would supplant the federal program. The state would simply cover the cost for those in the reduced meals program.
 - Ms. White clarified that meal prices were set at the local level, so it was difficult to ascertain what the State would have to pay.
 - There were two routes for determination of eligibility: direct income certification through SNAP, or an application with an attestation of income through the federal government.
 - no current system existed to collect applications for those who fell within 186-300% of the poverty level. The state would have to develop its own process, and localities would be responsible for collecting and reporting data.
 - The State currently operated on a reimbursement system, where the Local Education Agency provided information on the meals, followed by payment from the Department of Education.
- Sen. Lang noted that HB 572 was written with the Educational Trust Fund as the source for funds. HB 2 required that if HB 572 were to pass, then the program would be funded through the State Operating Budget. Sen. Lang asked if that stipulation concerned Ms. White.
 - Ms. White said she would have to investigate and deferred the question.
- Sen. Ward asked if the figures provided by Ms. White were up to date and asked if any estimate had been made to determine the consequences of increasing the income eligibility.
 - Ms. White said the Department of Education had a rough estimate of \$20-\$70m, which was being evaluated by the Legislative Budget Assistant.

Laura Miliken

Executive director, N.H Hunger Solutions

- Ms. Miliken shared that 130% of the federal poverty level was an income of \$32,000 for a family of three.
- The current income threshold left many hardworking families excluded from eligibility.
- Ms. Miliken believed that expenses should be considered in addition to income to determine eligibility for aid.
- Ms. Miliken pointed out that buses and books weren't distributed based on income and was curious why meals were treated differently.
- School meals were important for physical health but also mental health.
- Raising eligibility would streamline the government processes and reduce administrative burden.
- Ms. Miliken considered HB 572 to be an investment in the State's future and urged the committee to recommend HB 572 ought to pass.

Representative Steve Woodcock

Carroll- District 1

- Rep. Woodcock emphasized that HB 572 was cosponsored by teachers, superintendents, and principals, both rural and urban.
- School lunches were far more nutritious and of a higher quality than they had been historically.
- The pandemic revealed that middle- and lower-income families, who traditionally had not utilized the free and reduced meals program, now faced difficulty in providing nutritious food for their children.
- Rep. Woodcock said that most in the educational field recognized the valued necessity of food and shelter for students and asserted that the state held a responsibility to maintain the well-being of its communities.
- Sen. Lang said the House of Representatives had just passed HB 601, which would dramatically increase the number of students eligible for free and reduced lunch according to Sen. Lang. Sen. Lang asked if it would be wise to pass HB 572 considering the passage of HB 601.
 - Rep. Woodcock clarified that HB 601 didn't extend to the middle class like HB 572 did and emphasized that HB 601 facilitated the application process.
- Sen. Fenton pointed to the Educational Freedom Accounts; a program designed to assist lower income families and said that program-maintained eligibility at 300% of the federal poverty level just as HB 572 proposed. Sen. Fenton asked if Rep. Woodcock agreed that the increase would reliably assist children who were going hungry.
 - Rep. Woodcock agreed with Sen. Fenton and noted that the 300% figure was not arbitrarily set.

Representative Timothy Horrigan

Stafford – District 10

- Rep. Horrigan was in strong support of HB 572.
- During the pandemic, every child in Rep. Horrigan's district was given a free lunch.

- Rep. Horrigan said the House Finance Chair offered a grossly exaggerated figure for the school lunch program.
- Rep. Horrigan said the figure provided by the House Finance Chair to the Union Leader was more closely aligned with the cost for feeding every single child in the state without any subsidies.
- Rep. Horrigan noted that the free and reduced meals program was heavily subsidized by federal government and was a great way to support farmers and the agricultural industry.
- Rep Horrigan recommended making the income eligibility even higher.

Dave Alcox

Teacher, Milford High School

- Mr. Alcox was in support of HB 572.
- Mr. Alcox Mother was a hairdresser, whose income always bordered eligibility for assistance but never qualified.
- Mr. Alcox had a teacher who had a snack drawer, where the ritz and welches grape juices got him through the day.
- Money was so tight that chocolate milk had to be cut and rationed in his home.
- Mr. Alcox Taught for 25 years at Milford high school.
- Children could not satisfy the standards and goals set for them if they were not fed.
- Mr. Alcox was N.H's teacher of the year four times, and the National Civics teacher of the year twice.
 - Mr. Alcox considered those achievements to be the product of the comforts provided by supportive teachers and peers.
- Mr. Alcox believed that the state ought to remove barriers and simply provide children the tools necessary to perform.
 - The State should work towards providing all children a square deal, an equal start and positioning.