

Mary Morem, Superintendent
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Wednesday, February 12, 2025

Senator Mary Kunesch
Minnesota State Senate
95 University Avenue W.
St. Paul, MN 55155

Senator Kunesch, Senator Rarick, & members of the Senate Education Finance Committee;

While we thank the previous legislature for passage of the Free School Meals program, we cannot fully celebrate it, as there's a large number of students being left out. I thank you for your attention to correcting this problem.

Unfortunately, due to the federal legislation which the state legislation hinges on, **15,000 children who are in full-time virtual public schools cannot qualify for the school meals programs.** USDA requires that meals "be consumed in a congregate setting" and specifically excludes online programs from qualification. Minnesota chose to go further and provide more than what the federal level does – so why not make this change too? Children who would otherwise qualify for the free meals program due to family income levels, disability, etc., if they were in a brick-and-mortar school, do not qualify simply because they're online. **I have parents in my classrooms who cannot understand why their child could access free breakfast and lunch in the school one day but could not the next if they enrolled in the online school option.** Because it doesn't make sense. We can do better for the over 4,000 students and their families in Minnesota who need this benefit.

There is a bill ready to go that would address this issue directly, in the most logistically feasible way we can come up with. Our bill would utilize existing channels created for SNAP programs, Summer Meals programs, and others, and authorize funds in "the form of an EBT card or through other electronic methods, as determined by the department," with restrictions to ensure proper use of funds. Inclusion of this language in any future omnibus bill would help Minnesota do what it intended to do – feed kids.

When Minnesota is on a national scale, gaining recognition for "free school meals for all," we are saddened to say, that simply isn't true. We ask that you use this session to make the school meals program truly equitable and ensure the spirit of the legislation is effectuated around the state.

Thank you for your time,

Mary Morem