

Senate Education Committee

Trevor Currier 271-4151

SB 517-FN, relative to the responsibility of local school districts to provide meals to students during school hours, reimbursing schools for meals provided to students at no cost, and making an appropriation therefor.

Hearing Date: January 27, 2026

Time Opened: 10:12 a.m.

Time Closed: 10:34 a.m.

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Ward, Sullivan and Prentiss

Members of the Committee Absent : Senators Altschiller and Abbas

Bill Analysis: This bill authorizes school boards to raise eligibility for free meals, requires the department of education to reimburse schools who raise eligibility, and provides an appropriation therefor.

Sponsors:

Sen. Fenton

Sen. Lang

Who supports the bill: 274 People signed in support of SB 517-FN. To see the full list of sign-ins, please email the committee aide (trevor.currier@gc.nh.gov)

Who opposes the bill: 5 People signed in opposition of SB 517-FN. To see the full list of sign-ins, please email the committee aide (trevor.currier@gc.nh.gov)

Who is neutral on the bill: No one

Summary of testimony presented in support:

Senator Donovan Fenton - *Senate District 10*

- Senator Fenton introduced and testified in support of SB 517-FN
- Sen. Fenton stated that the purpose of this bill is to ensure students have access to meals during the school day without putting those costs completely on the school district.
- Sen. Fenton stated that this is an optional program that allows school boards to increase the eligibility of their students for free and reduced meals.

- Sen. Fenton added that for meals that fall outside of the federal reimbursement level, the responsibility to pay the difference will be split equally between the state and local municipalities.
- Sen. Fenton explained that this legislation requires districts who participate in this program to provide both online and paper applications that will be supported by the Department of Education.
- Sen. Fenton reiterated that this program is completely optional and districts will participate as they see fit.
- Sen. Fenton explained that unpaid meal costs never disappear and often show up in school budgets. He stated that this legislation provides a sensible solution and ensures that students in need are being tended to.
- Sen. Fenton stated that addressing food insecurity in schools would improve students' ability to learn and succeed academically.

Riona Corr - *New Hampshire Hunger Solutions*

- Ms. Corr testified in support of Senate Bill 517-FN and stated that this bill passed the Senate last year in SB 204.
- She explained that in all 50 schools with whom New Hampshire Hunger Solutions works with, there has been an increase in school meal debt.
- Ms. Corr explained that the proposed program is not a mandate but will reduce school meal debt and boost access to free and reduced meals for students across New Hampshire.
- She stated that for individuals who receive SNAP benefits, this program will not cut their aid but will offer another way for students to access the meals they need at school.
- She stated that the fiscal note predicted a 100% adoption rate from New Hampshire schools, which she doubts is likely.
- Senator Ward inquired about how many people in New Hampshire could benefit from this program. Ms. Corr replied that it's hard to determine exact figures, but a large number of people fall between 185% and 200% of the federal poverty level. This bill offers meals for families in that range.
- Senator Ward asked if the schools are opting into the program or if the parents will opt in. Ms. Corr responded that in this bill, the schools would decide whether they would participate in this program

Nancy Vaughn - *American Heart Association*

- Ms. Vaughn testified in support of Senate Bill 517-FN.
- Ms. Vaughn explained that children who eat healthy meals are more likely to prefer healthier foods in adulthood. She added that those who are fed properly have better academic outcomes.

- She explained that the American Heart Association understands that this program comes with a large fiscal note in a non-budget year, but the consideration of SB 517-FN and any possible alternatives is greatly appreciated.
- She added that many families would benefit from this program and that many parents do not participate in free and reduced meals because they fear their child will be the only one in line. She explained that this legislation would reach more families so that this fear can be relieved.
- Ms. Vaughn stated that she would prefer the state cover the entirety of the cost of the program so that districts are not hesitant to participate.
- Senator Prentiss commented that Senator Lang and Senator Fenton would be helpful in determining if there are alternative paths that could still get us closer to the goal of this legislation.
- Senator Ward asked if this program sends food home with the students. Ms. Vaughn responded that this bill specifically deals with feeding students while they are at school. She added that meals that students bring from home are often less nutritious than those provided at school. The bill acts as a companion to encourage children to prefer healthier food both at school and at home.
- Senator Sullivan suggested that one reason less healthy lunches are brought from home might be that parents focus mainly on their child consuming calories when they pack their meals. Ms. Vaughn responded that, along with this idea, the cost of healthier foods is often higher, which may steer families away from these options.
- Senator Ward commented that the solution might be to further educate parents on what makes a nutritious meal and consider the kind of food that they are serving. Ms. Vaughn added that a multi-faceted approach is the most helpful in this situation.

Jim O’Connell, Vice Chair of the Manchester Board of School Committee

- Mr. O’Connell testified in support of Senate Bill 517-FN.
- Mr. O’Connell stated that Manchester schools have around \$380,000 in meal debt and the School Committee has been working on ways to minimize that debt.
- He dispelled that he considered a falsehood that hunger no longer exists for children in New Hampshire. He added that around 8,000 students meet the qualifications for free and reduced lunch under the requirements laid out in previous legislation. He stated that the number is hard to pinpoint because many families don’t take advantage of existing programs.
- Mr. O’Connell explained that during the COVID-19 pandemic, free school meals were available to everyone, and many families stopped filling out the required paperwork.

- He explained that the opt-in aspect of the bill does not require school districts to participate.

Summary of testimony presented in opposition: None.

Neutral Information Presented: None.