

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
STATE OF MONTANA

GREG GIANFORTE
GOVERNOR



KRISTEN JURAS
LT. GOVERNOR

June 20, 2025

The Honorable Brandon Ler
Speaker of the House
State Capitol
Helena, MT 59620

The Honorable Matt Regier
President of the Senate
State Capitol
Helena, MT 59620

Dear Speaker Ler and President Regier:

We have a shared, bipartisan goal of supporting the health and well-being of Montana's kids, ensuring they are well-equipped to thrive at school. Like you, I recognize the important role of school meal programs that provide children with a reliable source of nutrition that helps improve health outcomes and support academic success.

House Bill 551 appropriates \$600,000 per year from the state's General Fund to the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) to cover the costs of eliminating the copayment for reduced-price school lunch and breakfast. Specifically, House Bill 551 requires OPI to administer a new program to distribute replacement funds to school districts that decide to eliminate these required copayments for reduced-priced school meals.

School meals are provided to students in Montana through the federal School Breakfast Program (SBP) and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which serves approximately 100,000 students daily, with half of those meals served to children for free or at a reduced price based on household income. Currently, families that are eligible for reduced-price school meals under SBP and the NSLP contribute to the cost of meals through a copayment of 30 cents for breakfast and 40 cents for lunch.

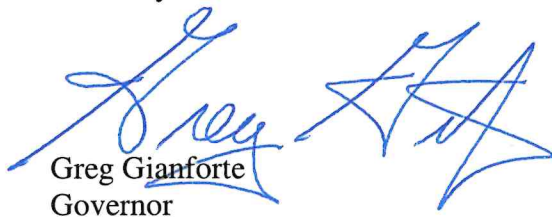
While I appreciate the sponsor's good intentions, House Bill 551's goals are already accomplished through existing programs. A variety of federal programs are already available to ensure all students have access to affordable, nutritious meals throughout the school year and summer, such as the SBP, NSLP, Special Milk Program, and the Summer Food Service Program, all of which Montana participates in.

Additionally, NSLP and SBP include a meal service option, Community Eligibility Provision, that allows eligible schools in high-poverty areas to offer meals at no cost to all students, regardless of household income. Under this program, a family no longer has to submit income-based applications for a child to receive free or reduced-price meals, as the federal government now uses a formula based on student participation in other programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Furthermore, while House Bill 551's fiscal note projected over a \$3 million cost, the Legislature did not appropriate sufficient funding to offset the expense. As indicated in the bill's fiscal note, OPI projects that the appropriation is insufficient to cover the cost of the program, and the Superintendent would need to seek a supplemental appropriation of \$335,107 from the state's General Fund in the 2027 Legislature, leaving Montana taxpayers on the hook.

Therefore, in accordance with the power vested in me as Governor by the Constitution and the laws of the State of Montana, I hereby veto House Bill 551: "AN ACT ESTABLISHING A STATE PROGRAM TO PROVIDE REPLACEMENT FUNDING FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS THAT ELIMINATE REDUCED-PRICE COPAYMENTS FOR SCHOOL LUNCH AND BREAKFAST; PROVIDING RULEMAKING AUTHORITY; PROVIDING AN APPROPRIATION; AND PROVIDING AN EFFECTIVE DATE."

Sincerely,



Greg Gianforte
Governor

Enclosure

cc: Legislative Services Division
Christi Jacobsen, Secretary of State