

# Coalition rallies for passage of free school meals for all children

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PROVIDENCE - Child advocates returned again to the State House on Thursday to rally support for a proposal that keeps falling short of the finish line: free meals for all schoolchildren regardless of income.

The Healthy School Meals for All Coalition has continually pushed for legislation to make this a reality, though Gov. Dan McKee's administration has already indicated he's not on board. That was back in January, when McKee's budget was unveiled. At a media briefing, Brian Daniels, director of the state Office of Management and Budget, said that with an estimated price tag of up to about \$40 million, universal free school meals aren't feasible right now.

But that hasn't deterred supporters. This year, Rep. Justine Caldwell and Sen. Sandra Cano are sponsoring bills in their respective chambers to offer every public school student a free breakfast and lunch every day without consideration of their family's economic status. Proponents cite the link between nutrition and learning, and the stigma that free and reduced-price meals place on kids who receive them.

Last year, senators approved the free meals program with limited opposition

from Republicans, but ultimately, the effort sputtered to a halt. In a December interview, House Speaker K. Joseph Shekarchi wasn't optimistic about the program, contending it "drives up the cost for the state taxpayers."

"When people say that we cannot afford this program, I say to them that we cannot afford not to have this program," Caldwell said at Thursday's news conference.

Caldwell worried that even families that are financially stable might not always pack a healthy lunch for their child, or remember to refill their school meal account. She also thinks that universal free meals would help tackle three issues she hears about at the State House: poor attendance, poor mental health and poor test scores.

Students from Davies Career & Technical High School and Classical High School spoke about seeing students go hungry, beg their peers for food, or be unable to eat because of dietary restrictions and food options that don't reflect their cultures.

Cano said it is "very concerning" that lawmakers haven't already passed the program, and said it would "ensure that children will not be bullied for being poor and getting free lunch."

"Schools should be and will be safe havens for our children," Cano said. "And this includes being a safe haven from hunger."