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Office of the Governor

August 21, 2024

My fellow Nevada parents,

Over the past week, our teachers and students have returned to their schools across the state. As pencils are sharpened and textbooks opened, I'm hopeful that this school year will be one of our state's most fruitful and rewarding academic years yet.

My administration has worked hard to give our schools, teachers, and students critical new funding and resources, so that we can maximize student success and learning outcomes.

Last year, I allocated over \$12 billion in funding for K-12 education, which increased per pupil funding by 25 percent and represented the largest education investment in state history. We also dedicated \$250 million for raises for teachers and education support professionals, while delivering transformative funding for the Teach Nevada Scholarship Program.

We also drafted and passed the Education Achievement, Opportunity, and Accountability Act, which implemented academic readiness benchmarks, like Read by Grade Three, and new accountability standards.

Another critical element of ensuring student success is ensuring that students can learn in a safe environment. That's why I'm proud that my administration drafted and signed the Safer and Supportive Schools Act, which establishes zero-tolerance policies for violence in classrooms and campuses.

However, we also know that ensuring a safe and secure learning environment includes ensuring access to free or reduced-price meals for students in need. I'm grateful that we have robust programs in place to ensure that these students receive free school meals in Nevada.

As this school year begins, 80.6 percent of K-12 Nevada students are automatically eligible for free school meals through their school's Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) designation. CEP is a non-pricing meal service option for schools and districts in low-income areas, which allows high poverty schools and districts to serve no-cost breakfast and lunch to all students without collecting household applications. That means that 80.6 percent of students can access free meals at their school any time they need to – no application required.

That also means that all students in Churchill, Clark, Esmeralda, Humboldt, Lyon, Mineral, Nye, Pershing, and White Pine County are automatically able to get free school meals. 87.4 percent of Nevada schools are CEP eligible for the 2024-2025 school year, and the full list of CEP schools is provided on the Nevada Department of Agriculture website.

Additionally, any student participating in another federal assistance program is automatically certified for free school meals. If a student's household participates in other federal assistance programs (such as SNAP, Medicaid, TANF, FDPIR), the student qualifies automatically for free or reduced-price school meals.

Lastly, if a student does not attend a CEP school and their household does not participate in any other federal assistance programs, their parent or guardian can still fill out the application for Free and Reduced-Price School Meals to determine their eligibility for free or reduced-price meals. Any family in need is encouraged to apply at any time during the school year.

Unfortunately, there has been an increase in misinformation about the availability of free school meals ahead of the 2024-2025 school year. Much of the misinformation stems from partisan attacks over my veto of Assembly Bill 319, which would have extended the free meal federal waiver program for the 2024-2025 school year through \$43 million of one-time funds.

With 80.6 percent of students automatically eligible through their school's CEP status, direct certification for students enrolled in a federal benefits program, and applications available for families to apply for free or reduced-price meals, my administration is confident that every student in need can receive free school meals.

Outside of our concern for using one-time money to fund a recurring meal program, my administration believed it was time – now four years after the pandemic – for the state to transition back to pre-pandemic school meal operations. Just as I removed the COVID-19 state mandates and ordered state employees back to pre-pandemic office operations, school districts should similarly return to normal school operations.

Additionally, studies have shown that up to 73 percent of food provided through school lunch programs can end up in the trash. By not extending the federal waiver program, we're able to eliminate food waste, while prioritizing funding for those with demonstrated need.

I think most Nevadans would agree that politics has no place in our school cafeterias. Families deserve confidence in our school meal programs, and students deserve easy access to nutritious meals at school. They deserve to know the truth.

For more information on how to access free or reduced-price school meals, please visit:

https://agri.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/agrinvgov/Content/Food/National_School_Lunch_Program/2024_CEP_list.pdf.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joe Lombardo', with a large, stylized initial 'J' and a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Governor Joe Lombardo