

Together at the Table Hunger Summit at Baylor University

Remarks by Senator Eddie Lucio, Jr.

Friday, October 25

Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I am so honored and humbled to be invited to participate in a gathering of this magnitude. This Summit provides a fantastic space for accomplished experts on food insecurity from all over the country—from state and federal government, as well as the private sector—to unite around one shared goal: to finally end all hunger in America. You are truly doing God's work, and I feel so blessed to be among you this afternoon.

In particular, thank you to the Texas Hunger Initiative here at Baylor University. During the recently concluded Texas legislative session, the Hunger Initiative was one of several key stakeholders from across the state I called upon for a Hunger Roundtable in the Capitol, where advocates shared their innovative ideas on how to improve the state's response to hunger through statutory reforms. I'm grateful to the Hunger Initiative for supporting my school breakfast bill during that Roundtable, and for making available valuable resources as we advanced that bill and other anti-hunger legislation.

I firmly believe no child should go through a day hungry. Unfortunately, that is still the reality for too many young people across Texas. One in four Texas children are food insecure, meaning they are not certain where their next meal will come from. Nearly three million students in Texas qualify for free or reduced-price school meals and close to half of these students attend schools where at least 80 percent of their peers also qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. This problem is particularly acute in lower-income communities like the ones I represent in the Rio Grande Valley. Half of all children in colonias go to bed hungry. In Cameron County alone, more than 90,000 people—many of them children—are considered food insecure.

But this problem isn't limited to the Valley or the border; in fact, you don't need to stray far from this very campus to find children in need. In McLennan County, the poverty rate is 27 percent, almost twice the national average—and it's been estimated that almost a fourth of youths here are food insecure.

As many of you may know, I have committed much of my time in public office toward eliminating childhood hunger in Texas. I have put particular attention on improving nutrition in Texas public schools. The reason for this is obvious: for too many low-income children, school is the only place they can count on receiving a meal. Again, look at McLennan County, where more than 26,000 children qualify for free or reduced lunch. No doubt, many of these children will go all weekend without the same certainty that they can be fed.

More than that, public schools tend to be the one place students can count on receiving a nutritious meal. I don't need to remind anyone here that oftentimes low-income families have a really hard time finding food that is both low-cost and highly nutritious. Those of you who attended last night's *A Place at the Table* documentary screening got a devastating look at the link between poverty and childhood obesity. At school, however, students are more likely to consume diets that meet or exceed the recommended daily amounts of vitamins and minerals.

I am pleased to report these last two legislative sessions, with help from advocates like you, we have taken some important steps forward in combatting hunger by increasing the availability of meals in schools. First, I was able to pass two pieces of legislation supporting summer meal service for children. In 2011, I passed Senate Bill 89, which requires school districts with 50 percent or more students who qualify for free-or-reduced-price meals to offer food service for at least 30 days during the summer break. Many school districts now provide such a service in cooperation with nonprofit and faith-based organizations.

At the time of this bill's passage Texas' participation in the Summer Food Service Program was among the lowest in the country! Less than ten percent of eligible low-income Texas children were served through the Program. Today, more can certainly still be done to ensure children's access to summer meals. As of this summer, only about 11 percent of children who participated in free-and-reduced-price meal programs state-wide

also took part in summer meal programs. Those numbers are increasing and we've seen an up-tick in participation just since Senate Bill 89 was passed.

Improving participation is going to take continued diligence on the part of government leaders and advocates like yourselves, to help forge partnerships to create feeding locations and advertise their availability. I know we're up for the challenge. In fact, during the 83rd Legislative Session this year, I was proud to continue my commitment to summer meals by passing House Bill 749, which will require the Texas Department of Agriculture to partner with the Texas Hunger Initiative and their affiliates to create a five-year plan to provide school children better access to summer meals. Again, thank you to the Hunger Initiative for taking a leadership role on this issue.

In addition to summer meals, we had another major legislative win this Session, passing a bill to promote children's access to a healthy breakfast. I was elated to pass Senate Bill 376, which will increase student participation in the federal government's School Breakfast Program. The bill provides that all schools participating in the federal free-or-reduced lunch program also make available a free breakfast to each of their students if 80 percent or more of those students qualify for free-or-reduced-price meals.

Senate Bill 376 was the cornerstone of my education agenda for this Session because I know that few resources are as important as a nutritious breakfast. It has been shown that providing access to food increases students' concentration, and reduces students' absences and discipline problems. Unfortunately, as recently as 2009, participation in the federal School Breakfast Program has been half that of its sister program, the National School Lunch Program. Even where it is offered, many eligible students opt not to take advantage of the Program because of the stigma of receiving a free or reduced-price meal. Offering free breakfast to all students in a school helps to eliminate that problem.

I filed Senate Bill 376 because I knew we needed to fight that stigma, and we needed to encourage all children to start off their days with a full stomach. I truly believe we have an obligation to ensure that every Texas child has every resource they need to reach their full potential.

I should note, however, that despite the tremendous benefits to student success this bill afforded, getting Senate Bill 376 passed out of the legislature took no small amount of work. Quite the contrary. The exact same bill failed to pass in 2011. This Session, it took hours and days of work meeting with stakeholders, including affected school districts.

It took a lot of work to dispel misconceptions about the bill among some of my Senate colleagues. Those misconceptions stubbornly persist, I'm sorry to report. The bill was even recently included as a bad vote on a conservative score card, used to rank elected members. I for one don't know why certain people got to decide that voting to help feed hungry children wasn't conservative.

I'll give these detractors the benefit of the doubt and just assume that they didn't understand the bill. Here's some criticisms I heard: First, some were concerned that the program would place a burden on schools. The exact opposite is actually true. The bill is revenue neutral to schools because the federal government reimburses all meals. In fact, schools with more low-income students have the most to gain from the Program. Schools in severe need even receive additional reimbursements from the USDA, which they can use to purchase more and better-quality food to offer to all their students.

Second, some of my colleagues were also concerned that the bill would expand the School Breakfast Program and cost more tax dollars. Here, they were also wrong. Texans' tax dollars are already used to support the federal School Breakfast Program nationwide. When our schools don't take advantage of the program, we lose those tax dollars to other states. Increasing participation in the School Breakfast program may increase the amount of federal funds going to local Texas schools by more than \$200 million.

I mention the obstacles we had to overcome because it illustrates an important point: No good work comes easy. Instead, it requires the dedication, patience, and hard work of several individuals united in their passion for serving others. Again, I have multiple organizations to thank for helping pass Senate Bill 376, including the Texas Hunger Initiative. Ultimately, our efforts paid off. We passed the bill, and in the process put Texas on the map: *The New York Times* even reported on its passage!

I personally pledge to keep working. I recently had the honor of being appointed to the National Conference of State Legislatures Foundation Hunger Partnership. I'm one of only two Texans in the group. I look forward to continue sharing our successes here in Texas with like-minded leaders from different states, and bringing innovative ideas to combat hunger back home.

Thank you again for allowing me to speak this afternoon. Events like this Summit serve as a reminder to me: so long as one child is hungry, our work is not done; so long as one child still goes to bed with an empty stomach, our work is not done; and so long as one child goes through a school day wondering where his or her next meal will come from, our work is not done. Truly, our work has only just begun.

I sincerely hope to work with all of you to advocate for Texas children.

Thank you for all you do. God bless.