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## PRESS RELEASE:

# Lucio Bill Expanding Free School Meals Passes Senate

The Texas Senate passed SB 89 by Lucio, Wednesday, which would expand the summer food program in Texas.

"Many Texas children go hungry in the summer because their schools don't provide free meals during the summer. SB 89 will ensure that more hungry children are able to stay healthy over the summer months," Lucio said.

The Summer Food Program provides low-income children with nutritious meals during the summer. Schools or alternative sites participating in the program (such as faith-based organizations) receive a fully funded federal reimbursement for each meal served.

"There is a lot of talk in Texas about unfunded mandates. However, SB 89 creates a funded mandate, a moral mandate - that schools districts take advantage of this great free resource and empower churches and charities to serve the poor."

Despite the fact that 3 out of every 5 children in Texas qualify for a free or reduced price lunch, Texas participation in the Summer Food Program is among the lowest in the county. Less than ten percent of eligible low-income Texas children are served through the program. One of the biggest barriers to participation in the program is a lack of awareness.

SB 89 requires school districts with 50 percent or more students who qualify for free or reduced price meals to offer Summer Food Service. (Current state law is 60 percent.) The bill also requires that food service be offered for at least 30 days during the summer break. The waiver option currently in statue will remain. School districts that have valid logistical constraints mitigating their ability to participate in the program will therefore be excused.

"The Summer Food Program provides a vital bridge for many of our state's poorest children," said Senator Lucio. "Churches, schools and charities can work together to administer the program. We owe it to our children to up our level of participation."

Bill Summary

SB 89 attempts to increase the number of sites that serve food through the program, the number of days of service, and the number of students who are able to benefit through the program.

Specifically, SB 89:

- Requires the Department of Agriculture and the Texas Education Agency to create a plan to serve summer meals for at least thirty weekdays in any district in which at least half of students qualify for free or reduced price meals.
  - Current law only addresses districts with at least 60 percent of students who qualify, but the change to 50 percent will align Texas law with Federal rules.
- Increases awareness before schools can waive out of the summer food program.
  - The bill requires School Boards to notify School Health Advisory Committees of plans to request a service waiver. It also requires the board to pass a resolution stating the intent to opt-out. The intent is to increase awareness and dialogue on the program before opting out.
- Requires the Texas Department of Agriculture and the Texas Education Agency to develop a joint plan to increase access to the program.
- Aligns statutory references relating to the program with the current administration.
  - Existing statute on the Summer Food Program is addressed in the Human Resources Code. However, the program has been transferred from the Texas Health and Human Services Commission to the Department of Agriculture. For the purpose of program consistency, SB 89 moves related statute to the Agriculture Code and repeals the existing reference.

NOTE: Under SB 89 school districts still have the same ability to waive out of service if they cannot afford to provide meals, if transportation is too difficult to arrange, or if they experience other extenuating circumstances.

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