



## POLICY ALERT

An Urgent Update on Issues that Affect You

Center for Public Policy Priorities

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### **School Lunch, Food Stamp Bills Moving in the Legislature**

#### **HB 2578 – School Meals (Rep. Eddie Rodriguez)**

House Bill 2578 would make determining eligibility for free or reduced price school lunch easier for schools and families. It would ensure that as many eligible children as possible receive lunch at school. Specifically, HB 2578 would:

**Increase access to school meals:** The bill requires the Texas Department of Agriculture\* (TDA) to encourage school districts to offer free meals to all students, regardless of family income (using a federal option known as “Provision II”) if the school districts can do so without losing revenue. The bill also requires TDA to provide a quarterly list to school districts of the children in their districts who receive Food Stamps, so schools can automatically enroll these children for free meals. This process, known as “direct certification,” is currently conducted only once per year. Children who receive Food Stamps are categorically eligible for free school meals and do not have to fill out an application. The purpose of direct certification is to reduce paperwork for families and schools and ensure eligible children receive free meals at school.

**Improve program integrity:** In addition to increasing the frequency of direct verification, the bill directs TDA to explore the use of “direct verification” to verify a child’s eligibility for free meals. Under direct verification a school district verifies the income information provided on school meal applications by using data from other income-tested programs such as Food Stamps and Medicaid. These tools improve program integrity by increasing the accuracy of the certification and verification processes for school meals. They also simplify program administration so that school districts can focus their efforts on increasing access among eligible children and improving program integrity.

**Lower administrative costs for school districts:** Direct certification and direct verification will also reduce paperwork for school districts and help them meet the increased verification requirements enacted under federal law in 2004. School districts have always been required to verify the income of a certain percentage of students enrolled in the school meals program by requesting official documentation from families. The 2004 law increased the sample of applications that school districts must verify every year. More frequent use of direct certification reduces the number of applications school districts are required to verify, because children who are directly certified are not subject to verification, and therefore are not considered when determining the size of a school district’s verification sample. Use of a direct verification process also reduces paperwork for school districts, since schools do not need to contact the household for documentation of income.

HB 2578 was voted favorably from the House Public Education Committee on May 5 and sent to the House Calendars Committee to be scheduled for a vote by the full House.

(\*TDA is the state agency in charge of the National School Lunch/Breakfast Programs)

## **HB 420 – Food Stamps (Rep. Elliott Naishtat)**

HB 420 would lift the ban that currently bars persons convicted of drug felonies from ever receiving Food Stamps. The 1996 federal welfare reform law enacted a lifetime ban on the receipt of TANF cash assistance and food stamps for people convicted of drug felonies for conduct after August 22, 1996, but gave states the option to enact legislation to opt out of or modify the ban. HB 420 would opt out of the ban for Food Stamps only. In addition, in the bill requires a person convicted of a drug felony to either: 1) be on parole, 2) have completed parole, 3) be enrolled in drug treatment, or 4) have completed drug treatment in order to qualify for benefits. If the legislation passes, Texas will join the 34 other states that have either opted out of or modified the ban in some way.

HB 2578 was voted favorably from the House Human Services Committee on May 5 and sent to the House Calendars Committee to be scheduled for a vote by the full House.

## **Next Steps**

- Contact members of the House Calendars Committee and ask them to support the bills by scheduling them for a vote as soon as possible. THERE ARE ONLY THREE WEEKS LEFT IN THE SESSION and THE SENATE WOULD NEED TO APPROVE THE BILLS AS WELL.
- As soon as the bills are scheduled, contact your representative and urge him/her to vote for the bills.

## **Find out more about HB 2578 and HB 420**

- CPPP's testimony on HB 2578 is on our web site at [http://www.cppp.org/files/3/TST%20HB%202578\\_Rodriguez.pdf](http://www.cppp.org/files/3/TST%20HB%202578_Rodriguez.pdf).
- CPPP's testimony on HB 420 is on our web site at [http://www.cppp.org/files/3/TST\\_HB%20420.pdf](http://www.cppp.org/files/3/TST_HB%20420.pdf).
- For information about the bills and House members go to [www.capitol.state.tx.us](http://www.capitol.state.tx.us).