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N.J. lawmakers vote to foot the bill for kids who can't afford school lunches

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The state Senate passed a bill Monday that would offer free meals for some public school students in New Jersey, amid a broader debate about how districts should treat families in debt on school lunches.

The bill (S4200) affects students who receive reduced-price breakfasts and lunches, and passed 36-0 at the Statehouse in Trenton. The measure still needs to be voted on in the state Assembly before it can head to Gov. Phil Murphy's desk.

More than 11.7 million reduced-price meals were served in New Jersey last fiscal year, according to legislative researchers. The federal government currently helps pay for that food, and the bill would set aside \$4.5 million from New Jersey's budget to help make up the difference.

"This will give student more access to a well-balanced meal," said state Sen. Teresa Ruiz, D-Essex, one of the bill's sponsors. She added that while this was a good "quick fix," it needed to be followed by more comprehensive reforms, such as making sure students had access to fresh fruit.

A breakfast costs \$1.79 and lunch costs about \$3.36, according to the fiscal report.

Earlier this year, the Cherry Hill school district considered blocking kids who owed a certain amount of money from receiving meals or attending prom. The proposal sparked a backlash, and lawmakers introduced several bills to help pay for meals and prohibit lunch "shaming."

Representatives for school groups have previously argued that schools need ways to recoup lost money, and that some families in debt are able to pay for meals.