

FACILITATING EQUITY IN EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS (FEES) STUDENT ACCESS TO FEE WAIVERS HB5265

REP. WILL GUZZARDI

*CASSIDY – FLOWERS – RAMIREZ
PASSED COMMITTEE UNANIMOUSLY*

Illinois school districts are permitted to charge students and their families annual mandatory fees. Fees can include textbooks, instructional materials, and school activities. These fees can add up quickly and can put a strain on low-income parents and guardians who are trying to make ends meet. Fortunately, in public schools, students experiencing homelessness or whose families are classified as low-income have access to fee waivers. Charter schools are obligated to waive fees for students who are experiencing homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act but are not required to waive fees for low-income students and their families.

Most public school districts identify and provide fee waivers for students by their eligibility for the federal free lunch program. Of the 62,497 students who attend charter schools in Illinois, 85% are eligible for the federal free breakfast and lunch program and if they were attending a traditional public school would be eligible to have their school fees waived. Education advocates and parents share that there is no uniformity in notification or eligibility in the charter schools or networks for families, and the waivers are given on a case-by-case basis usually only when parents and guardians reach out to their school's administrators. Parents and guardians are having to decide between meeting their family's basic needs and paying their children's school fees to ensure promotion and graduation.

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SOLUTION

HA2, removes reduced lunch student eligibility and includes classification of eligible fees and fines.

To make sure we are supporting low-income students in Illinois we should:

- ▶ Ensure charter school students have access to fee waivers like their public school counterparts
- ▶ Provide notice to families that they may qualify for fee waivers
- ▶ Require families to verify their status once each academic calendar year
- ▶ Expand waivers to include fines imposed on students and families
- ▶ Prohibit withholding transcripts and other disciplinary action due to lack of payment of the school fees before means-testing to determine if the family qualifies for a fee waiver

Seven states require fee waivers for both public schools and charter schools. These states include Arizona, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, and South Carolina.



"Waivers at charter schools prevent students from falling through the cracks and help students stay focused on their academics and not their current situation. It is important for students to feel that they matter and that they're not forgotten during difficult times."



"It's essential that Charter schools honor the fee waiver to help low income families These families are struggling and do not have the money to pay the fees. It is essential to help students to stay in school, be part of school activities, and stay in school to receive their education."