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Governor signs universal school meals into law at Piñon Elementary

By Margaret O'Hara mohara@sfnewmexican.com Mar 27, 2023 Updated 2 hrs ago 12



Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, right, talks to Piñon Elementary School students about their lunch Monday alongside state Sen. Leo Jaramillo, D-Española, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham joined the fourth graders during their lunch period to sign into law Senate Bill 4, which will provide free breakfast and lunch to all New Mexico public school students.

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Students at Piñon Elementary School were in agreement Monday about their lunch: It was pretty good.

Over a tray of disappearing chicken tenders, mashed potatoes, apples and carrots, fourth grader Dylan Garcia said the quality of the meal was consistent with most days' lunches.

Dylan usually eats school meals, he said, and the food gives him the energy to challenge himself during his favorite lessons — math.

"I think lunch is important because without lunch or breakfast, we can't get the nutrients our mind and body need to help with school," he said.

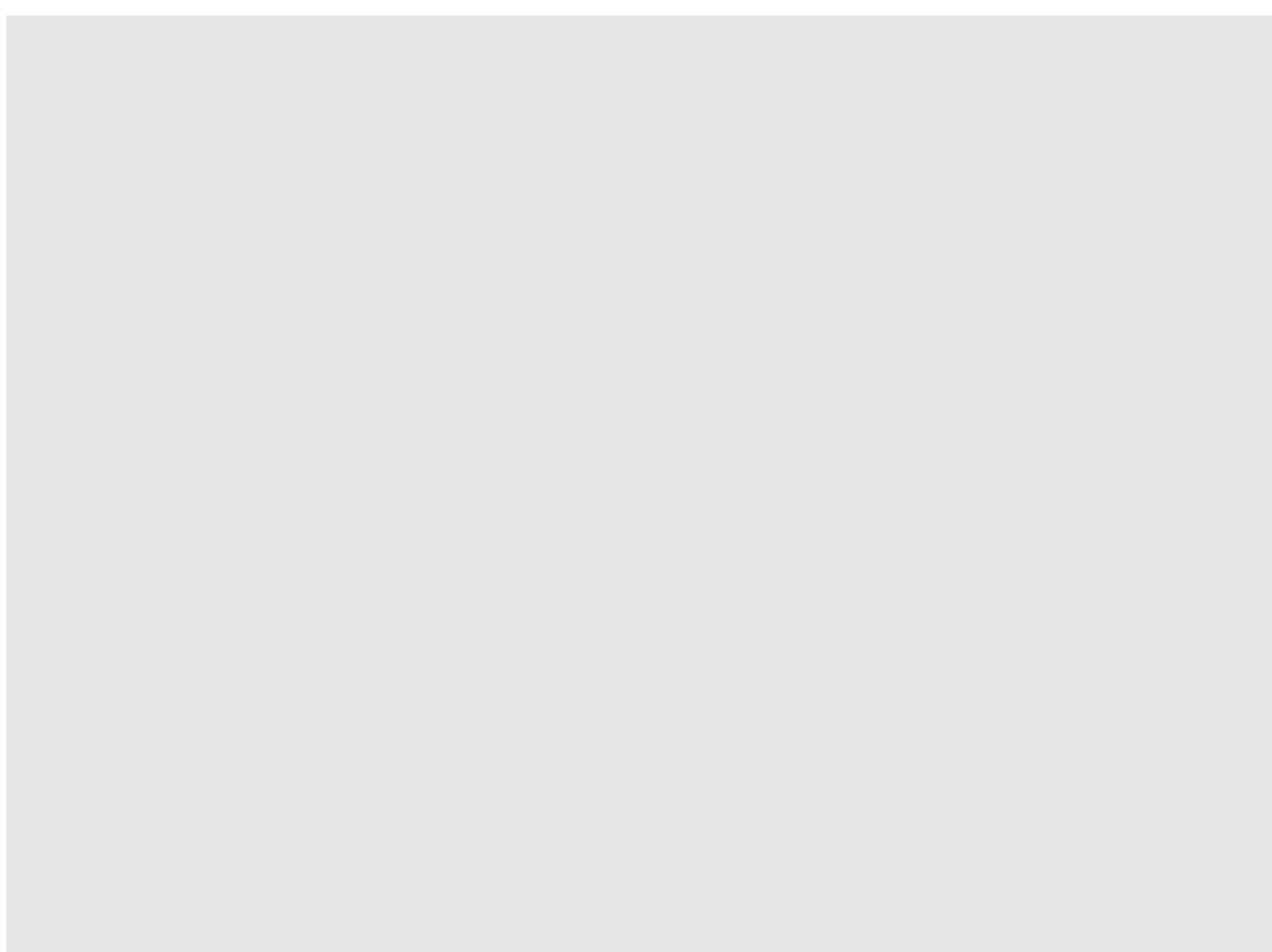
Dylan and his classmates had some unusual lunchtime visitors Monday. Flanked by Sens. Michael Padilla, D-Albuquerque, and Leo Jaramillo, D-Española, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham joined the fourth graders during their lunch period to sign into law Senate Bill 4, which will provide free breakfast and lunch to all New Mexico public school students.

The bill, Lujan Grisham and the bill's co-sponsors agreed, is a step toward alleviating child food insecurity, strengthening local agriculture and limiting food waste in schools.

"We're doing something today that is truly remarkable," Padilla told the fourth graders. "We're basically saying to the rest of the world — not just the country — how seriously we take our children, how seriously we take each one of you. ... Today, we want to take the focus off of your stomach, and we want to place it on your studies."

SB 4 was a priority for the governor this year. With nearly a quarter of New Mexico youth living in poverty and almost three-quarters receiving free or reduced-price lunches through a federal meal program, according to state data, Lujan Grisham described universal school meals as part of the solution to ensuring less hunger and better academic outcomes, a perspective that met with praise from child welfare advocates.

"Kids learn better when their stomachs are full and they aren't worried about their next meal. In New Mexico, most of the calories — most of the food that you need — happen at school," Lujan Grisham said.



Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham holds up Senate Bill 4 while explaining the signing process to students Monday at Piñon Elementary School. The bill will provide free meals for breakfast and lunch to all public school students in New Mexico.

The move toward free school meals is also consistent with a national trend; at least three other states have passed similar legislation, and more than 20 others are considering policy changes.

The measure eventually will eliminate debt accrued by families from unpaid student meal bills. Elizabeth Cull, director of student nutrition for Santa Fe Public Schools, estimated the district's unpaid meal costs will grow to about \$30,000 by the end of the school year — money that comes out of the operational budget — even with prices of just \$1.20 for breakfast and under \$3 for lunch.

Lujan Grisham said efforts to track down these dollars were misguided. The result, she said, was that schools focused on collecting lunch debt, not on meal quality or ensuring students were able to learn.

"If you do that in any government system, all you really do is spend more money on less service, less quality, and you leave kiddos and families behind," she said.

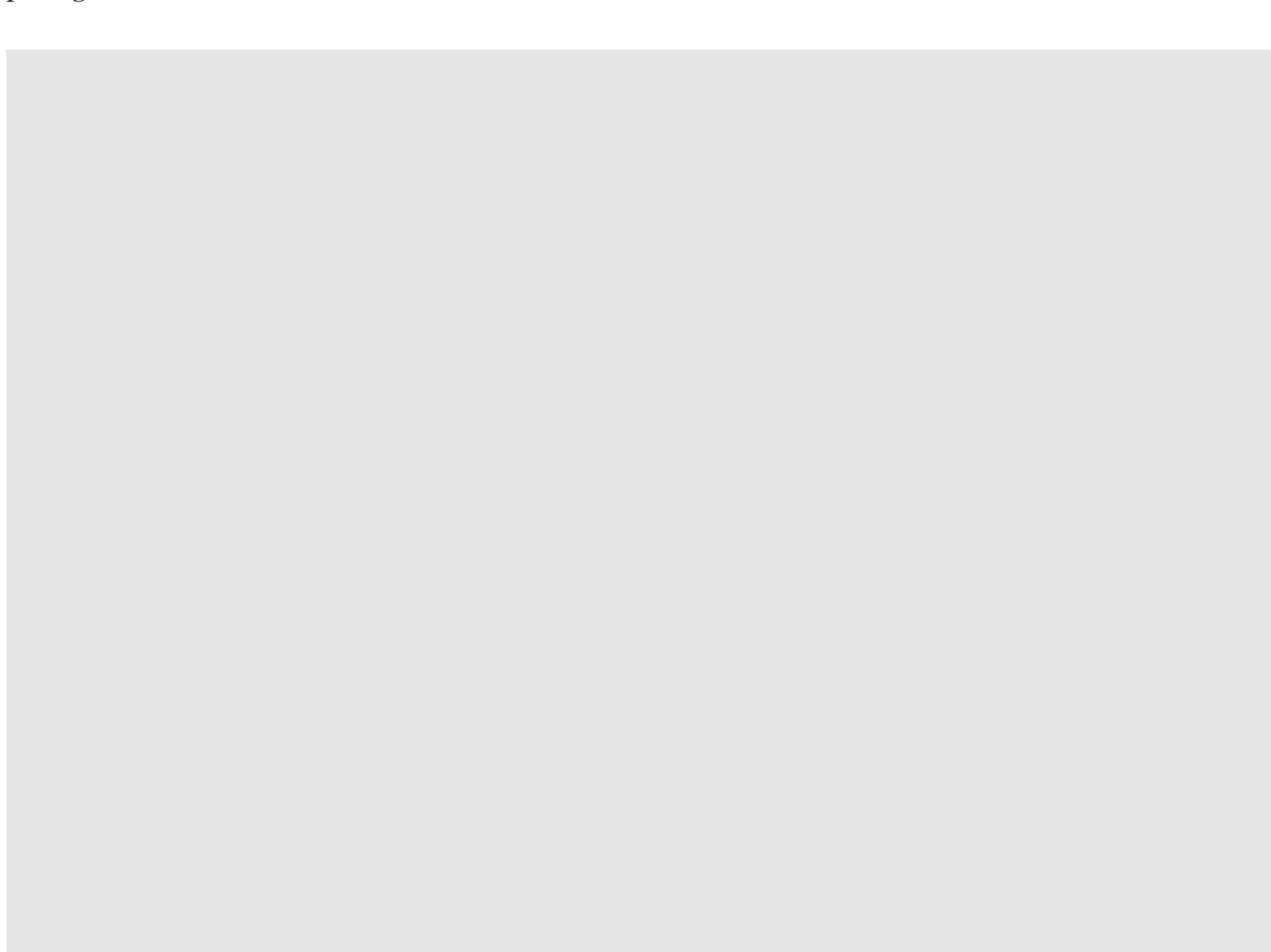
In the final weeks of this year's legislative session, the governor got her wish. SB 4 secured unanimous support from the House and Senate — as well as a \$22.5 million appropriation in House Bill 2, the state budget for fiscal year 2024.

Lujan Grisham said the state also will provide funds to encourage districts to purchase locally produced foods.

She asked students to think about the apples — or apple cores — on their lunch trays.

"Wouldn't that feel good, to know that a farmer right here in Santa Fe or La Cienega or Pecos or Rowe or Tesuque or Pojoaque or Española was growing those apples?" she asked.

"Food from the farms are very healthy, and they grow really fresh. If we didn't have any farmers or farms, we would not have food," added Lisleine Ortiz, a Las Cruces third grader who helped advocate for the bill's passage.



Alejandro Najera, a fifth grader at East San Jose Elementary School in Albuquerque, does a television interview Monday at Piñon Elementary School after the signing of Senate Bill 4 by Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham. The 11-year-old advocated for the bill during the recent legislative session at the Roundhouse.

Another portion of the bill's funding will be dedicated to upgrading equipment and beefing up staff in school kitchens to improve meal quality through freshly prepared meals made from scratch.

The bill also requires schools to limit food waste by allowing students adequate time to eat and providing space to redistribute allowable unwanted foods to other students or food banks.

It's a unique selling point for New Mexico's law, Lujan Grisham said, which is the first in the country to include a food waste provision.

Luckily, Piñon Elementary already has a system for itemizing and reducing food waste, explained fourth graders Kyrie Sturgeon and Yalexia Martinez. The process divides waste by solid foods and milk, the girls said, and ensures unopened milk cartons can be consumed by someone else.

After lunch, Lujan Grisham invited all of the fourth graders to join her at the front of the cafeteria.

With the crowd behind her, she leafed through the bill's pages, explaining that, without all the right signatures on the back page, a bill can't become law. She added her signature to the proper line.

"Senate Bill 4 — universal meals with all the accountability measures and support of local producers and farmers — is now the law of the land," Lujan Grisham said as the students cheered.



Margaret O'Hara Reporter

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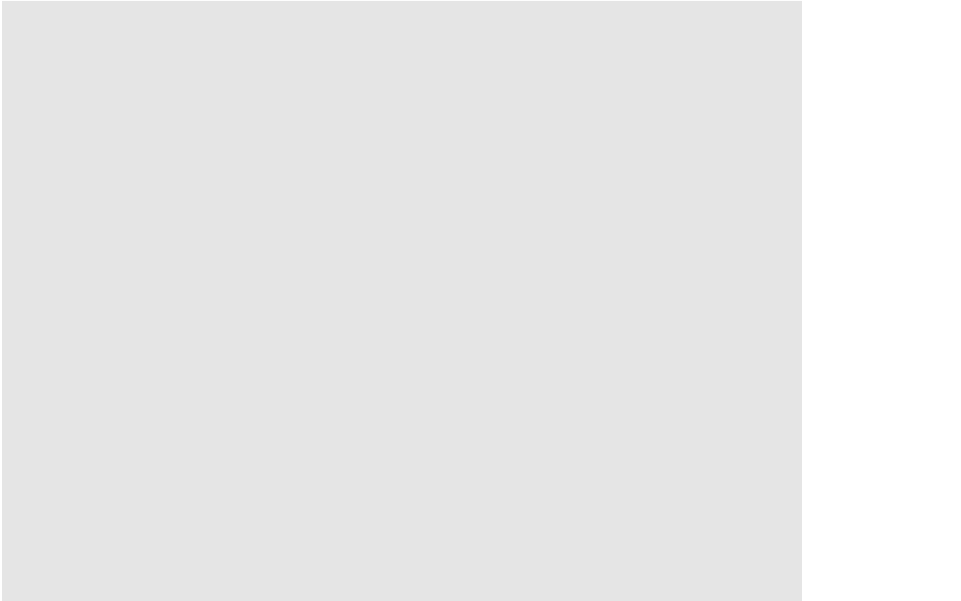
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