



Testimony in Support of SB 760

Public Schools – Student Meal Programs and Meal Charge Policies

Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

February 18, 2020

Maryland Hunger Solutions urges your support of SB760, which requires each county board of education to establish a meal charge policy that will eliminate stigmatizing practices, set requirements for communication with households when school meal accounts reach a low balance, improve efforts to ensure students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and set standards for alternative meals options that align with USDA nutritional standards.

During the 2018–2019 school year, an average of over 250,000 breakfasts and 420,000 lunches were served to Maryland students every school day through the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program. These two school meal programs are instrumental in guaranteeing that students have access to the nutrition they need to learn and thrive and not be distracted by hunger during the day.

However, when a student who is required to pay the full or reduced cost of their meal arrives in the cafeteria without funds to purchase their meal, they start to accrue school meal debt. School meal debt is a growing challenge among school districts nationwide, including among many school districts in Maryland. In response to this challenge, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) required all school districts that serve meals through the School Breakfast Program, National School Lunch Program, or both to establish and clearly communicate a local meal charge policy by July 1, 2017. USDA has issued guidance on developing strong policies, but there are no federal requirements for what must be included in the policy, nor are there baseline protections for children and families.

In fall 2018, we received a call from a distressed Maryland parent whose child had experienced the consequences of accruing school meal debt firsthand. Although this single mother was a SNAP recipient whose daughter received free school meals, an error in the system made a debt appear on her account. For the following month, this elementary school student went through the lunch line, received a hot meal, entered her account number to pay, had her hot lunch taken and thrown away in front of her, and was given a cold cheese sandwich in its place. While the situation was eventually remedied, there is no excuse for the lack of communication that allowed this to continue for an entire month, nor is there a way to repair the trust of that child in the system that failed her at such a young age. Unfortunately, this is not a unique story, as similar cases have occurred around the state and the country.

In response to this event, we released a report, [*School Meal Charge Policies in Maryland: Best Practices for Preventing School Meal Debt*](#), which looks at meal charge policies in 21 out of Maryland's 24 school districts for school year 2018–2019. The three districts not included in the findings of this report are Baltimore City, Dorchester County, and Somerset County. These districts use the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) districtwide to provide school meals at no charge to all of their students, effectively eliminating school meal debt and the need for a meal charge policy.



Among the findings, this report showed that as of spring 2019, among Maryland's 21 public school districts that require a meal charge policy: 18 had a written policy that could be accessed online or through a request to the district's food and nutrition services department; 10 were in compliance with the federal requirement to communicate this policy to families once per year; nine made their policy available on the school district's website; and 14 published their policy in an alternative location, such as a parent or student handbook, school board policy manual, or school cafeteria menu.

In terms of policy content, Maryland policies vary significantly in content and level of protection against meal shaming. While measures to protect and provide for students who cannot pay for their meals can have unintended negative impacts on school finances, policies that do not provide these protections often result in students shouldering the consequences of the meal debt.

Many Maryland policies guarantee some level of protection on behalf of the student; however many negative practices also can be found among Maryland school districts including serving nutritionally incomplete alternative meals to students after a predetermined charging limit has been reached; restricting participation in extracurricular activities or barring access to student records and report cards; allowing communication about debt and repayment to be directed at students; identifying students with pink slips, stickers, or notes from the cashier; and using debt collection agencies to recover unpaid school meal debt.

Although stigmatizing practices can be found among a significant number of the policies in Maryland, many school districts also have taken steps to implement best practices to prevent school meal debt from accumulating and eliminate stigma in the cafeteria. It is our hope that SB760 will help to spread those best practices across the state to be implemented on a more widespread and uniform scale.

Our report recommends the following best practices to strengthen nutrition programs while preserving the dignity of the children and families being served:

- ensure that all eligible students are certified for free or reduced-price meals;
- prevent the accumulation of debt by providing meals at no cost to all students when possible or waiving the reduced-price copay for students in the reduced-price category;
- abolish harmful practices that shame, stigmatize, or otherwise punish students for a lack of money; and
- establish a system that quickly and appropriately responds to debt as it occurs.

By enacting strong meal debt policies, like SB 760, Maryland can ensure that the cafeteria is a positive and supportive environment for all students, that stories like the one we heard back in 2018 will not be repeated, and that the children of Maryland receive the nutritional support they need with the compassion and dignity they deserve.

Thank you for your consideration. Maryland Hunger Solutions **urges a favorable report on SB 760.**