

Testimony of Mark Broadhurst, Chobani
In support of SB 760
MD Senate Education, Health & Environmental Affairs Committee
February 18, 2020 - Annapolis, Maryland

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee,

My name is Mark Broadhurst, and I lead Public Affairs at Chobani, America's number one Greek yogurt maker. We strongly support Senate Bill 760 and applaud Senator Lam for introducing this important bill and thank the Committee for giving it serious consideration.

Our founder and CEO, Hamdi Ulukaya, likes to say, "we make yogurt every day, but what we really want to make is a difference."

And that is what brings me here today. We are trying to make a difference. Please allow me to explain:

Late last school year, Chobani learned of a practice we thought was senseless – a school system in Rhode Island was throwing out hot lunches and replacing them with a cold sunflower butter and jam sandwich if the child's family owed the cafeteria money. We learned that the school district had more than \$47,000 in total school lunch debt, so we said, "let's pay it off and help reduce a burden on those families."

We thought that was a good thing to do - it would help those parents and children in need, and it would help the school district. Our CEO released a short video on his social channels to raise awareness of child hunger and it went viral!

That small act of kindness created a lot of awareness and attention. And we began to better understand how common this problem is all across our country.

It is not a problem that can be solved by paying off *one school's* lunch debts.

Nor is it one that can be solved by paying off EVERY school's lunch debt.

1 out of every 6 children in America is hungry each day. And 3 out of every 4 schools has a meal debt, some as high as hundreds of thousands of dollars each year.

It is a problem that requires systemic change and smarter state and federal child nutrition policymaking.

To help bring about this positive change, Chobani has partnered with the Food Research and Action Center, Maryland Hunger Solutions (whose leadership on this matter is truly making a difference), and Feeding America to advocate for a national policy to end "school lunch shaming" and increase access to federal child nutrition programs to help prevent school lunch debts in the first place. Our goal, lofty though in reach, is to stop the practice of meal shaming, relieve the burden on schools and feed millions more hungry children.

While today we can't impact federal policy, we can take a step in an important direction, a step that leads to changing the system.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, let's start by ending the practice of labeling kids in the school meal debt debate.

Although policies differ at schools all across the country, there is one constant – kids are caught in the middle of a conversation that should be between adults.

This Committee knows school is a tough environment for almost every child at one point or another.

Although we have faith that schools are not intentionally creating environments of stigmatization, in this case, we know the unintended consequences of certain school lunch debt policies are indeed making kids feel “othered, ashamed and embarrassed.”

That’s why SB 760 is so important. It will help protect our children, importantly at an extremely vulnerable point in their lives.

Regardless of the circumstances, let’s let kids be kids. Let’s stop the practice of embarrassing children in the lunch line at school because their parents or guardians owe the cafeteria money.

Ask yourselves how would you feel? As adults we are not immune from circumstances that sometimes put us in an awkward, demeaning position, especially at times of difficulty – running out of gas in our car, a bounced check, a declined credit card, a job or promotion we did not get, an election we didn’t win...but as adults, we are and should be better equipped mentally and emotionally to handle these setbacks.

But put yourself in the shoes of a nine-year-old boy in third grade whose cheesy breadsticks were thrown out on of all days his birthday because he could not pay. It happened, and this child who had been recently placed in his grandparents’ care was eligible for free lunch but his paperwork had not yet been processed by the school.

In a country where 1 in 6 children is hungry, should we be wasting food by throwing it out? Our answer is an emphatic no.

Not only is it wasteful, but the school is still incurring a debt. It doesn't make sense.

In a country where we are seeing child suicide rates soar to a 20 year high, should we be enforcing policies in schools that stigmatize children and make them feel "othered?" Our answer is a heartfelt no.

As every person here knows far too well, shame is a powerful force. When inflicted on a child — especially a child that's more vulnerable due to their family's circumstances — the damage and trauma it causes can be enormous and permanent.

The question we must all ask ourselves is this: do we believe vulnerable children should be forced to endure *more* shame and *more* trauma in schools across America? Our answer must be a resounding no.

Let's allow schools to be the nurturing environments we so desperately need them to be, where kids are not only taught their ABCs, but the life skills they need to help cope in a world that is complicated enough.

We urge Maryland to help demonstrate to the nation that lunch shaming has no place in our schools. We urge the Senate to pass SB 760 and take an important step in the right direction, a direction that will help protect Maryland's most important assets – its children.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.