

To: Chair, Paul G. Pinsky, Vice-Chair Cheryl C. Kagan, Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee

From: Susan M. Gross, PhD, MPH, RDN LDN

Re: Support for Senate Bill 760 Public Schools – Student Meal Programs and Meal Charge Policies

Date: February 18, 2020

My name is Susan Gross. I am a nutritionist and an assistant scientist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and I support Senate Bill 760. This bill will reduce meal debt shaming and stigmatization of Maryland public school students and take the first step towards expanding the availability of universally free meals through the community eligibility provision by requiring state data related to increasing the community eligibility program reimbursement rate to a minimum of 90% for all schools that are currently enrolled in or eligible for the program by determining groupings that allow for maximum school participation.

Since 2015, I have been speaking with school administrators, parents and students in Maryland about issues related to food insecurity. One of the consistent themes was that families of students who could not pay for the school meals and did not qualify for free meals often had trouble with coming up with the money for school provided meals on a regular basis. Reduced-price eligible students are more likely to incur cafeteria debts and often go without the food they need.¹ These Maryland students complained of experiencing shaming in the cafeteria when they did not have the money for the meal by being given an alternative lunch of low quality. Some decide to skip a meal so as not to be identified by their peers as poor or needy. Research in Maryland also reveals that students who qualify for reduced priced meals are at risk for food insecurity—the limited or uncertain access to enough healthy food—a condition which affects 17% of all Maryland households with children.² Skipping meals has been associated with poor academic performance and increased risk of behavioral issues.³ After the adoption of the community eligibility provision by the Baltimore City Public Schools administration, it was found that students attending Baltimore City Public Schools were nearly three times less likely to be food insecure, as compared to students attending a CEP eligible, but nonparticipating school – even after adjusting for race/ethnicity and education level of the adult.⁴

In a sense, shaming students for not having money for school meals is a form of bullying and should not be tolerated. Senate Bill 760 will alleviate this stigma, lead to more information collected regarding increased access to universally free meals for many of Maryland’s vulnerable children, and could lead to higher school achievement and improved conduct. Ultimately, this is an investment in Maryland’s future.

The opinions expressed herein are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Johns Hopkins University.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.

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1 Maryland State Department of Education data for SY 2013-2014

2 USDA food insecurity data for 2013-2015

3 Müller K, et al. *Eur J Clin Nutr.* 2013 Feb;67(2):185-9.

4 Gross S et al. *J Hunger Envir Nutr* Oct 2019 <https://doi.org/10.1080/19.320248.2019.1679318>