



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 1173

Public Schools – Student Meal Programs and Meal Charge Policies

Ways and Means Committee

February 26, 2020

Submitted by Stacey Jefferson and Margo Quinlan, Co-Chairs

Member Agencies:

Advocates for Children and Youth
Baltimore Jewish Council
Behavioral Health System Baltimore
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Marylanders Against Poverty

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Marylanders Against Poverty (MAP) supports HB 1173, which requires each county Board of Education to establish a meal charge policy that outlines a plan for preventing and addressing school meal debt, and prohibits actions that stigmatize students.

Maryland is one of the wealthiest states in the nation, however, nearly one in five Maryland children experience food insecurity, meaning they do not have consistent access to adequate food.¹ Two of the critical programs that address childhood hunger are the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. These school meal programs are key to ensuring that children are receiving the nutrition they need to not be distracted by hunger during the school day.

In the 2018-2019 school year, over 384,000 low-income students qualified for free or reduced-price meals across the state. While federal funding allows low income students to receive school meals at low or no cost, there are still instances when students arrive to the cafeteria without enough money to pay for their meal. While this happens for a variety of reasons, it may indicate that the family is struggling financially even if they are just above the cutoff line for free or reduced-price school meals, which especially can happen to families in states like Maryland where the cost of living is high.

Enacting strong policies can help address the root causes of this issue and prevent meal debt accumulation. The best practices laid out in HB 1173, particularly the strengthening of communication between schools and households regarding meal account balances and the free and reduced-price meal application process, will help to ensure that eligible students and families are receiving the support that they need to prevent the accrual of unnecessary debt.

MAP appreciates your consideration and urges a favorable report for HB 1173.

Marylanders Against Poverty (MAP) is a coalition of service providers, faith communities, and advocacy organizations advancing statewide public policies and programs necessary to alleviate the burdens faced by Marylanders living in or near poverty, and to address the underlying systemic causes of poverty.

¹ Feeding America. (2015). Map the Meal Gap. http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/map-the-meal-gap/?_ga=1.119040777.1641925123.1423756865