



Maryland HB 1173

Public Schools – Student Meal Programs and Meal Charge Policies

**Recommended Position:**

Support\_\_\_\_\_ Support with Amendment(s)\_\_\_\_\_ Oppose\_X\_\_ No Position\_\_\_\_\_

As President of The Maryland School Nutrition Association (MdSNA), this testimony is presented to provide a voice for our members. The MdSNA represents the thousands of passionate school nutrition professionals committed to ensuring students have access to healthy school meals. Our members continuously work throughout the year to enroll eligible students in the free or reduced-priced meal program, so students in economically challenged families have immediate access to the school meal programs.

While our association understands HB 1173 objectives, there are several policies mentioned that are currently required under federal regulations for school districts participating in the National School Lunch Program. The USDA mandates school districts adhere to the following policies addressed in HB 1173.

- Meal charge policy: Implement unpaid meal policies that are clearly communicated with parents and/or legal guardians and work with families to collect debt incurred from unpaid meals.
- Meal benefit applications: Must be readily available throughout the year to families. Provide assistance in completing the application when and if necessary. Applications must be accepted and processed throughout the year.
- Systems in place that do not overtly identify meal benefit status of students.
- Alternative meals provided to students must meet nutritional standards set forth by the USDA.
- Professional standards and training of personnel including how to minimize the stigma for student with negative account balances and/or receiving alternate meals.

Our association would like to bring forth conflicting policy within HB 1173.

- Section 7-125 (B)(3) authorizes a school to serve an alternative meal instead of a standard meal, however, prohibits a school from disposing of a meal after it has been served to the student. Determination of an alternative meal is done at the point of sale after a student has been served their meal. To meet the requirement of this section students would have to be identified prior to service, creating student management issues, especially in larger schools. Additionally, an alternative meal, even if an available meal option on the menu, overtly identifies a student, as the student is not provided a choice.
- Section 7-125 (D)(3) states “each school year, provide a printed copy of the meal charge policy to each student in a public school in the county.” Most counties are reducing paper as information is readily available in a variety of locations such as student handbook and district website. This mandate will increase printing and distribution costs.

HB 1173 mandates school districts provide meals to students however does not include funding to cover unpaid meal debts. The USDA prohibits federal funds be used to cover unpaid meal debt thus making local school systems liable to clear the “uncollectable” debt. As of January 31, 2020, Maryland’s unpaid meal debt is \$1,049,352.00. Funds would have to be shifted from education support to cover unpaid meals. Research shows school districts have seen an alarming increase in meal debt as families are not required have to pay for meals. This also eliminates an incentive to complete meal benefit applications, thereby possibly reducing federal funds coming into the State of Maryland. Reduction in the number of eligible free and reduced students would have a negative impact on access to other programs (Title I, Maryland Meals for Achievement, i.e.) thereby possibly reducing funds needed in these schools. Unintended consequences of this bill should be considered.

Recommend Maryland maintain allowance for local policy adoption as afforded by the USDA. As presented, HB 1173 would require additional paperwork, reporting and administrative time without a funding solution. Propose collaboration including school nutrition professionals to create legislation that is fiscally responsible and benefits Maryland students.

Thank you for your time and attention to reviewing this testimony.

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