

**Testimony SUPPORT of House Bill 628
Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs –
Universal Expansion**

**House Ways & Means Committee
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The Maryland State Education Association supports House Bill 628, which would make meals available to all students in a school that participates in the federal School Breakfast Program or National School Lunch Program. Achieving, as outlined in this bill, universal meal programs is one of MSEA's legislative priorities in the 2023 Legislative Session.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland's public schools, teaching and preparing our almost 900,000 students so they can pursue their dreams. MSEA also represents 39 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3 million-member National Education Association (NEA).

*"Hungry children cannot be expected to fully engage in their learning if they are distracted by their empty bellies. By ensuring that all students have access to healthy school meals, we are making a significant investment in our state's most precious resource. Providing every child in our state with the nutritious meal their growing bodies need to thrive not only helps them be better prepared to learn, it's also the right and humane thing to do."
- Cheryl Bost, President, Maryland State Education Association*

Educators know all too well that, for far too many of our students, the only source of a nutritious meal they might have access to in a day is at their school. Few things are more gut wrenching to educators than seeing their students suffer, particularly for the want of the sufficient amount of food their growing bodies need to survive and thrive. Hungry children experience real and lasting health impacts that can put their physical, mental, and cognitive development at risk as well as their social-emotional functioning. These impacts lead to deleterious effects such as poorer academic and behavioral outcomes for the children in our schools. Hungry children cannot be expected to fully engage in their learning if their attention is rapt by the rumbling and discomfort in their empty bellies.



This bill pairs nicely with the work the General Assembly has done through the Blueprint for Maryland's Future and builds on the last decade of meal expansion bills for students. The General Assembly and education advocates have worked in tandem to bring greater focus to community schools and to provide targeted resources to students living in concentrated poverty. As recently identified, over 50% of Maryland students now live in poverty and unfortunately that number has grown in the last decade. As we work to stand-up community schools around the state with important wrap around services, universal meals is another piece of that puzzle. Universal meals as outlined here reduce administrative burden, reduce meal shaming amongst students, and ensure that students are ready to learn with full bellies.

The State must do whatever practicable to make feeding children easier and this bill is a meaningful effort toward that goal.

MSEA urges a Favorable Report on House Bill 628.