



Testimony on behalf of the Center for Science in the Public Interest in support of SB 579

Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion

Senate Budget & Taxation Committee

Submitted by:

Catherine Cochran, MA

Policy Associate

Center for Science in the Public Interest

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on the Universal Expansion of Primary and Secondary Education Breakfast and Lunch Programs (SB 579). On behalf of the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a science-based consumer advocacy organization, I would like to take this opportunity to express our strong support for this Act. CSPI is a fierce defendant of science-based nutrition standards and has worked on school food for decades. Prior to our involvement in the passage of the federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which led to sweeping improvements in school meal nutrition, CSPI worked with state and local advocates to pass school nutrition policies across the country. Following the Trump Administration’s 2018 rule that weakened school nutrition standards, CSPI sued the Administration and won, ultimately getting their rule thrown out. CSPI also advocates for access to healthy meals for all students at the federal, state, and local levels, including involvement in approximately a dozen statewide healthy school meals for all campaigns.

With this testimony, CSPI urges a favorable report on SB 579 which aims to expand access to school meals by providing state funds to cover the cost of school breakfast and school lunch for all students in schools participating in the National School Lunch or School Breakfast Program.

Healthy School Meals for All Provide Needed Economic Support for Families

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, increased federal funds and a series of child nutrition waivers allowed students nationwide to receive free breakfast and lunch, regardless of household income.^{i,ii} Despite an overwhelmingly positive response from school districts, families, and public health and education advocates, Congress allowed these pandemic waivers to expire in summer 2022.ⁱⁱⁱ Several states, including California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont have since moved to ensure free access to school meals for students statewide.^{iv}

Maryland has already recognized the critical role school meals play. The Maryland Meals for Achievement program allows eligible schools to offer free breakfast in the classroom,^v and the Maryland Cares for Kids Act of 2018 ensures any child eligible for free or reduced-price meals receives a free meal.^{vi} However, even with these policies, current eligibility criteria leave far too many Marylanders behind, including lower middle-class families struggling to make ends meet. This school year, for a student to receive free meals in Maryland, their household income cannot exceed \$55,500 annually for a family of four.^{vii} Inflation is hurting families' budgets, and many cannot shoulder the costs of school meals. For those who do qualify for free meals, stigma and shame associated with qualifying prevent some students from participating.^{viii} Nowhere else during the school day do we require proof of income like we do in the cafeteria. We willingly provide books and transportation regardless of family income.

School meals, which are an invaluable opportunity to instill healthy eating habits for life, should be treated no differently.^{ix} We must close this eligibility gap in Maryland and provide free meals for all students.

Healthy School Meals for All Promote Nutrition, Food Security, and Academic Performance

A recent systematic review found that universal free school meals programs are positively associated with higher meal participation rates and in some cases, improved diet quality and academic performance, particularly when programs included free breakfast and lunch. Additionally, while studies evaluating effects on food security status were limited, the results showed a promising relationship between universal free meal programs and improved food security.^x Research shows that in 2017-2018, food consumed at school was the highest quality source of food for kids – followed by grocery stores, other sources, worksites, and restaurants.^{xi} Additionally, by negating the need to stand in line to pay for meals, healthy school meals for all allow children more time to eat their meals.

Healthy School Meals for All Advance Equity

Healthy school meals for all remove stigma for children participating in the program and provide equitable access to healthy meals. A recent report found that when all students have access to free meals, perceptions of bullying and fighting decrease outside of school and kids that previously were income-eligible for free- or reduced-priced meals felt safer inside the school, including the cafeteria.^{xii} Healthy school meals for all ensure that children who might be on the edges of eligibility, or children who are experiencing homelessness, have recently immigrated, have caregivers who may struggle with administrative paperwork, or are in foster care do not fall through the cracks.

No child deserves to be hungry at school. It's time for Maryland to make Healthy School Meals for All a priority and join the growing list of states that have guaranteed all students have access to the healthy meals they need to grow and thrive.

As such, I thank you for your consideration and urge a favorable report on SB 579.

Catherine Cochran

Catherine Cochran
Policy Associate
Center for Science in the Public Interest
cochran@cspinet.org

ⁱ Families First Coronavirus Response Act. P.L. 116-127 § 2202, 134 Stat. 185.

ⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Child Nutrition COVID-19 Waivers*. November 8, 2022.

<https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster-assistance/child-nutrition-covid-19-waivers#:~:text=Waiver%20to%20Allow%20Fiscal%20Action,7%207%2F6%2F22>). Accessed February 13, 2024.

ⁱⁱⁱ Keep Kids Fed Act of 2022. P.L. 117-158.

^{iv} Food Research and Action Center. *Raise Your Hand for Healthy School Meals for All*. November 2023. [Healthy School Meals for All \(frac.org\)](https://www.healthy-school-meals.org/). Accessed February 7, 2024.

^v Maryland Hunger Solutions. *Maryland Meals for Achievement*. 2020.

<https://www.mdhungersolutions.org/federal-nutrition-programs/school-breakfast-program-sbp/maryland-meals-for-achievement/>. Accessed February 7, 2024.

^{vi} Maryland Cares for Kids Act. H.B. 315. 2018.

^{vii} Maryland State Department of Education. *Income Eligibility Guidelines (Effective July 1, 2023 through June 30, 2024)*.

<https://www.marylandpublicschools.org/programs/SchoolandCommunityNutrition/Documents/IEG-23-24.pdf>. Accessed February 7, 2024.

^{viii} Cohen J et al. Impact of Massachusetts' Healthy School Meals for All Policy on Families. Nourish Lab at the Center for Health Inclusion, Research and Practice. June 2023.

https://www.childnourishlab.org/files/ugd/383bcd_45ee5fed8e224ffd8639f0f498086e31.pdf. Accessed February 7, 2024.

^{ix} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Eating Healthier at School*. September 19, 2022.

https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/features/eating_healthier.htm#:~:text=Schools%20play%20an%20important%20role,nutrients%20like%20calcium%20and%20fiber. Accessed February 7, 2024.

^x Cohen J, et al. Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review. *Nutrients*. 2021; 13(3):911.

^{xi} Liu J, et al. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021;4(4):e215262.

^{xiii} Gutierrez E. The Effect of Universal Free Meals on Student Perceptions of School Climate: Evidence from New York City. Pages 22, 24. June 2021. EdWorkingPaper: 21-430. Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University.