

February 14, 2024

Committee: Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
Bill: SB 579 - Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion
Position: Support

Testimony of Alexis Bylander, Senior Policy Analyst at the Food Research & Action Center

Thank you for the opportunity for the [Food Research & Action Center](#) to submit testimony in support of HB 696, which would provide all Maryland students with access to a free breakfast and lunch at school.

The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) is the leading national nonprofit organization working to improve public policies and public-private partnerships to eradicate hunger and undernutrition in the United States. FRAC has worked for decades to improve and strengthen the federal School Breakfast and National School Lunch Programs through federal and state legislation. We work extensively with federal, state, and local government agencies, schools, private nonprofit organizations, and other stakeholders to ensure that the programs reach the children who need them.

States across the country are recognizing the importance of free school meals for all students and passing legislation. California, New Mexico, Minnesota, Michigan, Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont, and Colorado have passed permanent School Meals for All policies and many additional states are currently considering similar legislation. Nevada has used COVID relief funds to offer free school meals to all students during the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years.

The National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program are the two largest child nutrition programs in the United States. Students are in school approximately 180 days a year and many students participate in school-based before and after school care and summer programming. Providing healthy meals to students through the School Nutrition Programs can significantly increase food security for students. In fact, a [recent study](#) found that U.S. children are getting their healthiest meals at school, demonstrating that school meals are one of the federal government's most powerful tools for delivering good nutrition to children.

The School Nutrition Programs support academic achievement. School meals serve as both a nutritional support and an educational support because hungry children do not

have the focus and energy to learn or get the most out of their school day. There is a strong body of research that links participation in school meals to positive educational and health outcomes for our nation's children. Studies have shown participation in school meals improves students' attendance, behavior, and academic achievement, and reduces tardiness. Students who eat breakfast at school [perform better on standardized tests](#) than those who skip breakfast or eat breakfast at home, and have improved scores in spelling, reading, and math. Additionally, school breakfast reduces the number of visits to the school nurse in the morning, [improves students' mental health](#), and reduces behavioral problems, anxiety, and depression. The positive impacts of participating in school meals are long lasting, supporting long-term overall educational attainment among students participating in school meals.

All students should permanently receive free school meals. Serving school meals to all students at no cost would be a gamechanger for students, families and schools, supporting students' education and health and improving school nutrition finances and operations.

Serving all students eliminates the stigma associated with school meals and will put an end to unpaid school meal debt. Offering free and reduced-price meals only to students from low-income households can create a stigma and reduce participation. By providing every student the opportunity to participate in school meals, the stigma some children, particularly older students, fear of being labeled low-income by their classmates is eliminated. Free meals for all students eliminate school meal debt, which has been a problem for many families and schools under a tiered payment system.

Perhaps most importantly, at a time when our country is critically examining how to end racial disparities, **free school meals for all can help advance equity.** Free meals would help reduce racial disparities in health and education for Black, Latinx and Indigenous children, who experience hunger at disproportionate rates and face systemic barriers to food access both at school and in their communities. Providing school meals to all students is also critical for advancing racial equity and justice, as it would ensure that Black, Indigenous and Latinx students are able to access the key nutrition they need to thrive in the classroom and beyond.

Providing free school meals to all students is an investment in Maryland's future. We urge you to support SB 579.