



February 12, 2024

2024 SESSION SUPPORT TESTIMONY
SB0579: Universal School Meals

BILL: SB0579: Primary and Secondary Education - Breakfast and Lunch Programs - Universal Expansion

COMMITTEE: Budget and Taxation

POSITION: Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 0579

BILL ANALYSIS: Altering the standards of the State Free Feeding Program, beginning in fiscal year 2025, to require that if a school participates in the federal School Breakfast Program or the National School Lunch Program, then each student in the school must be offered a meal at no cost to the student; providing for the reimbursement rate at which the State shall pay county boards and participating nonpublic schools for the meals offered to students; etc.

Dear Chair Guzzone and members of the Budget and Taxation Committee:

The Montgomery County Food Council (MCFC) urges you to SUPPORT this bill to provide free meals to Maryland students. This legislation is a necessary investment for the health and academic success of students in Maryland.

For many students, school is the most reliable source of food and school meals provide both financial and emotional relief to families. A stable diet of nutritious foods allows students to better focus in class and sets them up for success throughout the school day. By providing meals that follow USDA guidelines to all students, this bill ensures that every student will receive nutritious school meals, while removing the stigma associated with participating in school meal programs. Like desks, textbooks, and transportation to and from school, meals should be considered an essential part of the educational experience in our state.

During the 2021-22 school year, over 95,000 Montgomery County students ate school lunch, and more than 50% of them received free or reduced-priced meals. This number does not



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begin to represent the entirety of need in the county. Due to the high cost of living in Montgomery County, there are many students who face food insecurity but are ineligible for free and reduced-price meals due to their household income being above 185% of the federal poverty level. This gap causes food insecurity for many families across the county.

In addition to decreasing food insecurity, universal school meals will address a serious financial issue facing our schools. Knowing the critical nature of school meals, schools often provide food to students who do not have sufficient funds to cover the cost. In doing so, they accrue unrecoverable debt. In addition, there is a huge burden on the school system in keeping track of these debts and attempting to recover the funds without stigmatizing students and their families. This legislation would eradicate both of these issues.

We strongly support this bill to establish universal school meals at participating public and nonpublic schools, and create a system to support students enrolled in schools that are not eligible. Studies have shown that students who skip breakfast have lower attendance rates and academic performance than students who eat breakfast². Providing all students with access to free, nutritious meals can help bridge this gap of academic achievement. To best ensure the future success of all Montgomery County students, and students in the state of Maryland as a whole, it is vital to remove barriers to food access and academic success. Other states such as Colorado, Massachusetts, Maine, and California have adopted universal school meals, and we want to see Maryland join this group. **For these reasons, the Montgomery County Food Council supports SB0557 and urges a FAVORABLE REPORT for this bill.**

The Montgomery County Food Council is a nonprofit organization that serves as the primary connection point for businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, and residents around food system issues in our County. We bring together over 2,000 local and regional partners in community-wide education, advocacy, and capacity building initiatives. Our work cultivates a more resilient, sustainable, and equitable local food system by enhancing food access for the over 100,000 at risk for hunger, expanding food education opportunities for all residents, supporting our County's farms and food and beverage businesses, and addressing the impact of local food production, distribution, consumption and recycling on our natural resources

For more information, please contact Michelle Caruso, Director of Policy and Partnerships, at the email and phone number below.



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