

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 579

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

Senate Budget and Taxation Committee

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My name is Dr. Susan Gross. I am a nutritionist and an associate practice professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. I have been studying the impact of universal free school meals in Maryland since 2015 and I strongly support Senate Bill 579-Primary and Secondary Education-Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion, which aims to provide equitable access to healthy school meals and will ensure no student goes hungry during the school day. Additionally, this bill will support school systems, students, and their families by covering the cost of breakfast and lunch for all Maryland students.

Research shows that well-fed kids learn better and are less likely to engage in bad behaviors that are distractive to their peers. Children also go on to become the workers of the society and thus go on to make it possible for earlier generations to retire in old age.¹ The provision of healthy meals for all students will also reduce the stigma associated with not having money to pay for meals as no one will be singled out.

One strategy to bolster our child nutrition safety net in the past was to expand access to the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Since 2014, CEP has allowed high-poverty schools and school districts to participate in US Department of Agriculture meal programs to offer universal free breakfast and lunch.

Moreover, my research found that after the adoption of CEP by Baltimore City Public Schools, students in participating schools were nearly three times less likely to be food insecure compared to students attending a CEP eligible, but nonparticipating school, even after adjusting for race/ethnicity and education level of the parent/caregiver.² My research consistently shows that families of students in non-CEP districts who could not pay for the school meals and did not qualify for free meals often had trouble coming up with the money for school provided meals on a regular basis. Maryland students in non-CEP districts complained of experiencing shaming in the cafeteria when they could not afford to pay for meals at school. Additionally, children and adolescents fear the stigma of being identified by their peers as poor or needy, which often leads to skipping meals.^{3,4}

During 2020 and 2021, the American Rescue Plan provided flexibility for all schools to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students. Maryland rose to this challenge, seamlessly provided these meals to all its students, and strengthened our safety net for all families. Unfortunately, this flexibility expired in the Fall of 2022, and in 2023 once again, students and families in Maryland faced uncertainty about breakfast and lunch on school days and schools in Maryland are once again facing school meal debt.

In 2023, Maryland expanded eligibility for free meals by including Medicaid participation as a criterion. School administrators across Maryland used this expansion of eligible students to adopt CEP. Unfortunately, for some school districts, the reimbursement for school meals from USDA was still not enough for them to go forward with CEP adoption. In the past year, I have been interviewing food service directors across Maryland about adoption of CEP. One food service administrator commented “So for us to go CEP, we have to find that money somewhere else. Which in food service, that is not an easy thing to do, which is what prevents so many districts from making that decision” and another “So, if we provide more funding for this program, we can do a better job at running it, but without funding, we can't pay workers. Without adequate funding, we can't buy quality food and have dependable vendor contracts. We're providing the healthiest meals that are out there at a mass level. So, we need to recognize that this is a worthwhile investment.” This bill SB 579- Universal Meal Expansion build on the success of CEP by providing universal free breakfast and lunch in all schools across Maryland. In 2022-23, 11 of 28 eligible Maryland school districts were eligible but did not adopt CEP, 56 of 138 schools eligible but not at a level that achieves full meal reimbursement (40-50% ISP) did not adopt CEP, and there were

12 schools in Maryland that were at full reimbursement level who did not adopt CEP.⁵ The funding from SB 579 would bridge the funding gap for these schools and increase CEP adoption across Maryland and allow our schools to use all of the federal funds available to provide universal meals to their students.

With Universal Meal Expansion students will have the security of knowing that at least two meals per day are available to them each school day, and it will provide the security and stability they need to learn and grow.

Maryland has the opportunity to reduce food insecurity, meal debt shaming and stigmatization of Maryland students and expand the availability of healthy school meals through SB 579.

As such, I urge a favorable report on SB 579 in order to support students, families, schools, and entire communities as we move beyond the pandemic.

The opinions expressed herein are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Johns Hopkins University.

Thank you for the opportunity to express my thoughts.

¹ Kleinman RE, et al. Pediatrics. 1998. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.101.1.e3>

² Gross S, et al. J Hunger Envir Nutr Oct 2019 <https://doi.org/10.1080/19.320248.2019.1679318>

³ Müller K, et al. Eur J Clin Nutr. 2013 Feb;67(2):185-9.

⁴ Hecht A, et al. American journal of public health 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305743>

⁵ Food Research & Action Center. Community Eligibility: The Key to Hunger-Free School. School Year 2022-2023. May 2023. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/cep-report-2023.pdf>