



BILL: House Bill 696 / Senate Bill 579
TITLE: Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion
HEARING DATE: February 14, 2024 / February 14, 2024
POSITION: SUPPORT
COMMITTEE: House Ways and Means / Senate Budget and Taxation
CONTACT: Mr. Steve Edwards, Deputy Communications Officer (301-766-8914)

The Washington County Board of Education supports House Bill 696/Senate Bill 579, which would alter 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 meals offered to students, etc.

Washington County Public Schools (WCPS) recognizes the connection between student health and wellness, a healthy school environment, and the ability for students to learn and reach their full potential. Providing nutritious meals at no cost to all students at school not only promotes good nutrition, health, and well-being, but is also important in helping to decrease absenteeism, reduce the number of behavioral issues, contribute to an improved school environment, and helps to equip students to better learn and succeed.

This bill will benefit all families by removing the financial burden of purchasing school meals, especially for those families whose income slightly exceeds the eligibility requirements for federal free and reduced-price meal programs or who otherwise qualify, but fail to complete the necessary application. Currently, school breakfast in Washington County costs \$1.65 and lunch at the elementary level is \$2.45, while secondary students pay \$2.70. Therefore, a family who is ineligible for free or reduced-price meals would pay either \$4.10 or \$4.35 per day for their child to eat school-provided breakfast and lunch. If that student attends all 180 days of school, the annual cost is \$738 or \$783, depending on the grade level. While this may not seem like much to some, it is a burden for many of our families who are forced to make a choice between having their students either go hungry at school or the family go into arrears with the school system, as we never deny a child food.

For the current school year, families are already indebted to WCPS approximately \$47,000 for school meals. This total is likely to continue to grow, but it is expected that just a small portion of that indebtedness will be collected. This bill will benefit schools by eliminating the need to act as a collection agency and devote precious resources to collect outstanding balances from families. It will also prevent school districts from being in the unenviable position of deciding whether to secure the services of a collection agency which would be harmful for both the family and the school district's relationship with them.

This bill will also help to eliminate the concerns of some families about their student being singled-out or treated differently when securing free meals at school alongside other students who do not participate in the federal free and reduced price meal programs. Schools should be places where all students feel welcomed and valued. Providing them with free breakfast and lunch only helps to deliver that important message while helping to ensure each and every student is at their personal best and ready to learn.

The Washington County Board of Education respectfully requests a favorable report on House Bill 696 and Senate Bill 579.

Thank you.

Cc: Washington County Board of Education Members
Washington County Delegation to the Maryland General Assembly
Dr. David T. Sovine, Superintendent
Dr. Jennifer Webster, Associate Superintendent for Administration and Leadership
Dr. Garry Willow, Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction
Mr. Jeffrey Proulx, Chief Operating Officer
Ms. Ilissa Ramm, Chief Legal Counsel
Mr. Michael Embley, Director of Food and Nutrition Services
Mr. John Woolums, Director of Governmental Relations, Maryland Association of Boards of Education
Ms. Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director, Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland