



Mission: To improve public health in Maryland through education and advocacy ***Vision:*** Healthy Marylanders living in Healthy Communities

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 579
Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion
Committees: Budget and Taxation; Education, Energy, and the Environment
By: Maryland Public Health Association (MdPHA)
Hearing Date: February 14, 2024

Chair Guzzone, Chair Feldman, and members of the Budget and Taxation Committee, and the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 579. This bill would require that schools participating in the federal School Breakfast Program, or the National School Lunch Program offer a meal to each student at no cost to the student, whereby a reimbursement rate shall be provided to allow the State to pay county boards and participating nonpublic schools for the free meals offered to the students.

The school environment plays a vital role in children’s diets and overall health, and policies for universal free school meals can contribute to positive child health outcomes. Fortunately, a large body of research assessing universal free school meals found positive associations with diet quality, food security, and academic performance for low-income and food-insecure households.^{1,2} Access to healthy school meals is a critical cornerstone to improving chronic health conditions and reducing educational inequities among young people.³ Furthermore, free school meals augment overall household resources and provide children with a regular source of nutritious meals.

Food insecurity is a significant public health problem affecting children in the United States.⁴ Food insecurity disrupts food intake or eating patterns due to a lack of money or resources, and has been associated with adverse health, social, and academic outcomes among children. In Maryland, 543,650 people are facing hunger - and of them 167,020 are children. Also, 1 in 8 children in Maryland face hunger.⁵ Sadly, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated food insecurity in Maryland making it difficult for charitable programs to fully support those facing hunger.

¹ Katherine Ralston, Katie Treen, Alisha Coleman-Jensen, and Joanne Guthrie. Children's Food Security and USDA Child Nutrition Programs. United States Department of Agriculture. Summary. https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/84003/eib-174_summary.pdf

² Cohen, J. F. W., Hecht, A. A., McLoughlin, G. M., Turner, L., & Schwartz, M. B. (2021). Universal school meals and associations with student participation, attendance, academic performance, diet quality, food security, and body mass index: A systematic review. *Nutrients*, 13(3), 911. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu13030911>

³ Seligman HK, Lararia BA, Kushel MB. Food insecurity is associated with chronic disease among low-income NHANES participants. *J Nutr*. 2010;140(2):304-10. Available from: <http://doi.org/10.3945/jn.109.112573>

⁴ Thomas, M. M. C., Miller, D. P., & Morrissey, T. W. (2019). Food insecurity and child health. *Pediatrics*, 144(4), e20190397. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-0397>

⁵ Maryland | Feeding America. (n.d.). Retrieved February 17, 2023, from <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/maryland>

Additionally, the association between poor nutrition and obesity continue to be significant. Hence, it is crucial that reimbursable school meals contain a fruit or a vegetable⁶. Lastly, government assistance programs that promote free school meals must be established and sustained to help bridge the meal gap.

Thank you for your consideration and we urge a favorable report for Senate Bill 579.

The Maryland Public Health Association (MdPHA) is a nonprofit, statewide organization of public health professionals dedicated to improving the lives of all Marylanders through education, advocacy, and collaboration. We support public policies consistent with our vision of healthy Marylanders living in healthy, equitable, communities. MdPHA is the state affiliate of the American Public Health Association, a nearly 145-year-old professional organization dedicated to improving population health and reducing the health disparities that plague our state and our nation.

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⁶ Terry-McElrath, Y. M., O'Malley, P. M., & Johnston, L. D. (2015). Potential impact of national school nutritional environment policies: Cross-sectional associations with us secondary student overweight/obesity, 2008-2012. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 169(1), 78–85. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2014.2048>