

**Written Testimony Submitted for the Record to the Maryland Senate
Budget and Taxation Committee - For the Hearing on
Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion (SB579)
February 14, 2024
SUPPORT**

Free State PTA represents over 70,000 volunteer members and families in over 500 public schools. Free State PTA is composed of families, students, teachers, administrators, and business as well as community leaders devoted to the educational success of children and family engagement in Maryland. As the state's premier and largest child advocacy organization, Free State PTA is a powerful voice for all children, a relevant resource for families, schools and communities and a strong advocate for public education. ***Senate Bill 579, Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion – aligns with Free State PTA's legislative agenda by ensuring children receive nutritional support they need with compassion and dignity, regardless of the ability to pay for school meals. National PTA also supports federal and state funding programs that implement Universal Free School Meals for all students, regardless of income levels.***¹

Free State PTA strongly supports SB 579, which aims to expand access to school meals by providing state funds to cover the cost of school breakfast and school lunch for all students in schools participating in the National School Lunch or School Breakfast Program. This legislation is an essential investment for the health and academic success of Maryland students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought increased attention to the unacceptably high number of Maryland families that struggle with food insecurity, a number which has remained alarmingly elevated over the past three years. As hundreds of thousands of Maryland children and families continue down the long road to recovery from the social and economic impacts of the pandemic, there has never been a more important time to make significant investments in the school meal programs.

Extensive research has linked participation in school meals to a number of benefits:

- improved academic achievement, standardized test scores, and cognitive function²;
- improved attendance, which is positively linked to academic achievement³;
- reduced food insecurity, which is linked to poor academic outcomes⁴;
- improved nutrition, such as increased consumption of fruit, vegetables, and milk⁵;
- improved overall health and long-term health outcomes, as well as reduction in obesity rates, anxiety, and depression⁶.

¹<https://www.pta.org/home/advocacy/ptas-positions/Individual-Position-Statements/position-statement---improving-school-meals-program/>

² Vaisman, N., Voet, H., Akivis, A., & Vakil, E., (1996). Effects of Breakfast Timing on Cognitive Functions of Elementary School Students. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/8859144/>

³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228638584_Breakfast_and_Learning_An_Updated_Review.

⁴ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26722983/>

⁵ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19166672/>

⁶ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0304407611001205>

Marylanders need this investment. During the 2020 and 2021 school years, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has provided waivers to schools across the country, allowing school meals to be served at no cost to all students across the country, ensuring that every student has access to these important benefits. However, now that these waivers have ended, we have returned to a tiered payment system that leaves too many children out by allowing them to fall through the cracks. For example, to qualify for free school meals, a student's family must be living at or below 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, which translates to annual income of less than \$36,000 for a family of four for the 2021–2022 school year. Similarly, a family of four must have an annual income of around \$52,000 or less to qualify for reduced-price meals. With the cost of living on the rise, there are too many Maryland families who struggle financially to meet their most basic needs and yet do not qualify because their income exceeds this incredibly low eligibility threshold. There have been reports of children skipping meals because they have a lunch debt. Teachers often attempt to fill in the gap by providing snacks to hungry children.

By providing school meals at no cost to all students, Maryland would be supporting equity in the classroom and making sure every child has the nutrition they need in order to excel. These meals are important to students' academic success just as textbooks or transportation are and should be treated as a critical component to education. When students are distracted by hunger because they are unable to afford school breakfast or lunch, they miss out on the chance to learn and benefit from the important opportunities offered by Maryland's education system.

Hungry kids can't learn. Ensuring that every child in the state has access to a nutritious school breakfast and lunch every day is a smart and effective investment in Maryland's communities and future. **Therefore, the Free State PTA urges the passage of SB579.** The **Maryland Education Coalition** joins this testimony.

Testimony is presented on the behalf of

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