



**Testimony in support of
Senate Bill 579: Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs
– Universal Expansion**

Budget and Taxation Committee

Position: Favorable

February 14, 2024

Strong Schools Maryland is a network of education advocates dedicated to ensuring the full funding and faithful implementation of the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future. The Blueprint guarantees a world class education for all students and commits our public school system to supporting the needs of the families they serve. Food security is a crucial component of a student’s ability to thrive and achieve. As such, **Strong Schools Maryland stands in support of Senate Bill 579.**

The Blueprint for Maryland’s Future envisions a World-Class system of public schools for our state’s students. We are making record-breaking investments in education and resources to support students for educational excellence. Through community school expansions and concentration of poverty grants, the Blueprint provides support and services that address the needs of children in communities with high poverty rates, high crime rates, and those that lack access to adequate health care and social services, with resources provided at the school level and in the community. SB 579 reflects these ideals by expanding breakfast and lunch programs in the state.

Senate Bill 579 would:

- Provide free meals to students by requiring 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;
- Support county boards and participating nonpublic schools by calculating a reimbursement for the the State to provide; and

- Expands access for students who attend schools that do not participate in federal nutrition programs by requiring the state to pay the difference in costs.

Students who experience hunger have been proven to have low performance in school, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.¹ Hungry students are more likely to score lower on standardized tests, repeat a grade, be suspended from school, get sick more often, and be hospitalized more frequently.² Maryland has now begun automatically adding students under Medicaid coverage to the free or reduced-price school lunches program. This new criteria of eligibility has identified a large blindspot in our counting of students in poverty. **We have been missing 1 in 9 students.**³

Now more than ever, we must affirm our commitment to Maryland students. Senate Bill 579 expands breakfast and lunch programs so that more students in need receive nutritious meals and local boards have the state support they need to thrive.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 579.

For more information, contact Riya Gupta at riya@strongschoolsmaryland.org

¹ [American Academy of Pediatrics](#)

² [No Kid Hungry](#)

³ [DLS 2023 Fiscal Briefing](#)