

Senate Bill 579
Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion
Report
House Ways and Means Committee
March 27, 2024

Position: SUPPORT

Senate Bill 579 authorizes a Department of Legislative Services study on the creation of a universal free school meals program that would provide breakfast and lunch at no cost to all Maryland students who attend a school that participates in the National School Lunch or School Breakfast Program.

The Maryland Food Bank estimates that 1 in 3 Marylanders are at risk of food insecurity. A person who is food insecure does not have consistent access to healthy and nutritious food on any given day, and this problem persists in every area of the state. There are also communities and populations who are disproportionately affected by food insecurity, including families with children and communities of color. The causes of food insecurity are complex and often include additional factors such as low income, lack of reliable transportation, and missing community resources such as grocery stores.

The economic stability of a child's family should not dictate whether they are able to eat nutritious food every day, yet for too many Marylanders this is the reality. However, it is not just families in the lowest income bracket who are struggling. 35.5% of all Marylanders are finding it difficult to afford their basic household necessities – including food, and more alarming is that 34.7% of Maryland families report that their children are not eating enough because food is unaffordable.

The Maryland Food Bank sees firsthand the absolute beneficial impact of meals that are served while children are at schools or other safe community centers through our Supper Club, which served over 600,000 meals at 34 sites to children after school in FY 23, and our Summer Club, which served almost 69,000 meals at 38 sites to children during the summer of 2023. Further, we operate food pantries at 189 K-12 schools across the state, where in FY 23 we distributed the equivalent of over 2.4 million meals serving approximately 48,000 Maryland families. The sheer magnitude of need is present in these programs, and the Maryland Food Bank knows that our efforts, while substantial, cannot alone solve child food insecurity in the state, as a crucial time of day for children to eat is missing – namely, breakfasts and lunches.

The Maryland Food Bank recognizes the costs associated with universal school meals as well as the difficulty in implementing such a program. The data this study will collect would provide crucial insights into how Maryland may accomplish this task and ultimately provide school meals to all students at no cost to their families, as well as inform anti-hunger organizations like the Food Bank with up to date and informative research on child poverty. We are supportive of the attached amendment outlining the parameters of such a study.

The Maryland Food Bank appreciates your consideration and respectfully requests a favorable report on SB 579.



HB0696/803024/1

AMENDMENTS
PREPARED
BY THE
DEPT. OF LEGISLATIVE
SERVICES

13 MAR 24
08:55:06

BY: Delegate Palakovich Carr
(To be offered in the Ways and Means Committee)

AMENDMENTS TO HOUSE BILL 696
(First Reading File Bill)

AMENDMENT NO. 1

On page 1, strike in their entirety lines 2 and 3 and substitute “**Education – Study on a Universal Free School Meals Program**”; and strike beginning with “altering” in line 4 down through “schools” in line 11 and substitute “requiring the Department of Legislative Services, in consultation with certain experts, to conduct a study on the creation of a universal free school meals program; specifying the requirements and report date of the study; and generally relating to a study on the creation of a universal free school meals program”.

On pages 1 and 2, strike in their entirety the lines beginning with line 12 on page 1 through line 5 on page 2, inclusive.

AMENDMENT NO. 2

On pages 2 through 7, strike in their entirety the lines beginning with line 6 on page 2 through line 2 on page 7, inclusive, and substitute:

“SECTION 1. BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF MARYLAND, That:

(a) In this section, “universal free school meals program” means a program that offers breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students in public schools and participating nonpublic schools.

(b) The Department of Legislative Services, in consultation with expert representatives of the education, antihunger, and public health communities, shall conduct a study on the creation of a universal free school meals program.

(c) The study required under subsection (b) of this section shall examine the potential impact of a universal free school meals program on:

(1) the academic performance of students in the State;

(2) the finances of the families of students and the associated socioeconomic impact;

(3) the goals of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future relating to academic performance and attendance;

(4) student attendance, absenteeism, and tardiness;

(5) student health, nutrition, and diet;

(6) student unpaid meal debt; and

(7) best practices for implementation of a universal free school meals program.

(d) The study required under subsection (b) of this section shall also examine states that have implemented a universal free school meals program, including:

(1) details of the programs that have been implemented;

(2) impacts of the programs on the items listed under subsection (c) of this section; and

(3) best practices and lessons learned from the implemented programs.

(e) On or before December 1, 2024, the Department of Legislative Services shall report its findings and recommendations to the General Assembly, in accordance with § 2-1257 of the State Government Article.

SECTION 2. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That this Act shall take effect June 1, 2024. It shall remain effective for a period of 1 year and 1 month and, at the end of June 30, 2025, this Act, with no further action required by the General Assembly, shall be abrogated and of no further force and effect.”.