



February 24, 2026

SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENT FOR HB 490
Education – The Blueprint for Maryland's Future – Revisions
House Appropriations Committee
House Ways and Means Committee

Greetings Chairs Barnes and Wilkins, Vice Chairs Kaiser and Feldmark, and Members of the Committees.

Maryland Hunger Solutions is a statewide, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization working to end hunger, improve nutrition and promote the well-being of Marylanders by maximizing participation in federal nutrition programs, addressing root causes of hunger and advocating for permanent solutions upending hunger and poverty statewide. We strive to overcome existing barriers to state and federal nutrition assistance programs and create self-sustaining connections for low-income Maryland residents experiencing food insecurity.

Maryland Hunger Solutions supports HB 490, which extends the timeline for a hold harmless provision that defines the methods available for schools using the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) to determine the number of students used to calculate State Compensatory Education Funding. **We also support an amendment put forward by Strong Schools Maryland**, which would add language to guide the process for determining future methods, which would offer a longer-term solution to the challenges being experienced by these schools.

As Marylanders continue to struggle against stagnant wages, diminishing government supports, and rising costs of living, the federal child nutrition programs, in particular the school meal programs, have become more important than ever to help families stretch their limited resources and ensure their children have the nutrition they need to thrive in and out of school. Unfortunately, recent cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid passed under H.R. 1/"OBBA" are threatening the support systems that so many Maryland families rely on to maintain their health and keep food on the table.

H.R. 1/"OBBA" made deep cuts to SNAP and Medicaid by slashing benefits, instituting harsh time limits i.e. work requirements, eliminating humanitarian eligibility for asylees and refugees, capping future benefit increases, and shifting unprecedented new costs to states. These changes will continue to exacerbate hunger and push more struggling families further into poverty. They will also have ripple effects on other programs such as school, summer, and afterschool meal programs, WIC, SUN Bucks, and state education funding, by impacting the way we are able to measure poverty in schools and the reliability of those measurements.

Close to 270,000 children reside in households who rely on SNAP and Medicaid. These same children through direct certification are able to receive school meals at no cost. Direct certification leverages data and technology to automatically link children in SNAP households with free school meals, eliminating the need for a school meal application. These direct certification rates are the primary basis for determining which schools can utilize the CEP. By making school meals available to all students at no cost, schools are able to provide healthier school meals, improve academic outcomes, and further eliminate childhood hunger.



Maryland Hunger Solutions

Ending hunger and promoting well-being

Once a school opts into CEP, the need for collecting school meal applications is eliminated, making direct certification data the only poverty measure collected by the school's nutrition department. In the past, the loss of school meal application data was a major barrier for schools wanting to adopt CEP due to the link between school meal application data and state education funding level determinations. However, in 2015 the Maryland General Assembly passed the Hunger-Free Schools Act, which allowed school districts to be “held harmless” with regards to qualifying for State Compensatory Education Funding based on previous Free and Reduced-Price Meals data collected prior to CEP implementation.

This hold-harmless provision from 2015 has been in effect for over 10 years, **allowing Maryland’s CEP adoption to grow to over 700 schools, resulting in over 390,000 students across the state having access to school breakfast and school lunch at no cost.** Without this hold-harmless provision, many of our CEP schools and school districts would not have been able to opt into CEP out of fear of losing critical education funding.

Unfortunately, this hold-harmless provision is set to expire this year. Combined with the expected loss in reliable data from federal programs due to recent H.R. 1/”OBBA” cuts, the loss of this provision would likely cause an extreme undercounting of students experiencing poverty, forcing schools to reconsider their CEP status in order to maintain their education funding levels.

HB 490 helps to remedy this challenge by including an extension of the hold- harmless provision for one fiscal year, until SY 2027. While this is a critical step towards ensuring that CEP schools continue to receive the resources needed to support all Maryland students, it does not provide a long-term solution to this on-going issue.

For these reasons, Maryland Hunger Solutions supports HB 490 and respectfully urges the committee to adopt an amendment put forward by Strong Schools Maryland, which outlines guidance for the state to develop new methods for measuring poverty in schools that will help fill the gaps in our current systems.

We applaud the Maryland General Assembly for previously taking important steps to create flexibility in the state code to enable schools to eliminate school meal applications through implementation of the CEP, without the fear of losing state education funding. We support HB 490 to create more needed changes which will allow schools to move forward now and recommend the inclusion of additional language to ensure a long-term solution is developed hastily.

Thank you for your consideration.

COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY SUPPORTS CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND LEARNING

In **MARYLAND**, approximately **218,000** children live in food-insecure households, jeopardizing their health and well-being.¹

School meal programs combat food insecurity by providing millions of children with the nutrition they need to learn and thrive.

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is an option within the school meal programs that increases students' access to nutritious food by allowing schools and school districts serving large numbers of children from families with low incomes to offer meals at no charge to all students.

How CEP Schools Are Reimbursed

Rather than relying on school meal applications to determine a school's federal reimbursements, CEP schools are reimbursed based on the share of students who are automatically eligible for free school meals without an application because they meet specific criteria, such as being in foster care or participating in certain federal means-tested programs, including SNAP. Schools can adopt CEP if at least 25 percent of students meet these criteria. The more students who are automatically eligible for free school meals, the more federal reimbursement CEP schools receive.

CEP Is a Win for Students, Families, and Schools

CEP provides all students access to the balanced school breakfasts and lunches they need to be well-nourished and ready to learn, while reducing the stigma often present in school cafeterias when schools have to track students' eligibility for free, reduced-price, and paid meals.

When students have access to free meals at school, families have lower grocery bills and more money in their household budgets to help make ends meet.

CEP makes school meal operations more efficient and effective for schools and districts. CEP eliminates the administrative burden associated with school meal applications, strengthens program integrity, and supports school nutrition finances by eliminating school meal debt and increasing participation in school breakfast and lunch programs, which allows for economies of scale.

In the 2024–2025 school year, 74 percent of eligible schools nationwide adopted CEP. These 54,000 schools reached more than 27 million students around the country.



In the 2024–2025 school year:

700 SCHOOLS

in **MARYLAND** adopted CEP. An additional **397** schools were eligible to adopt CEP but did not participate.

THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) CUTS

recently enacted in H.R. 1 will **exacerbate food insecurity** and have ripple effects for the school meal programs, including threatening schools' ability to implement CEP.

As children lose access to SNAP, their automatic eligibility for free school meals is severed and federal reimbursement for meals served in CEP schools decreases, jeopardizing the program's financial viability.

In **MARYLAND**, during the 2024–2025 school year:



471,311

children ate a school lunch and **252,595** children ate a school breakfast on an average school day.²



23

school districts adopted CEP for some or all schools. An additional **12** school districts had schools that were eligible to adopt CEP but did not participate.



392,075

children attended schools that adopted CEP.

By repealing SNAP cuts and investing in CEP, policymakers can reduce barriers that keep eligible children from receiving free school meals and help families afford to put food on the table.

¹ Analysis of 2021–2023 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, rounded to the nearest 1,000. The data for this analysis was pooled across multiple years to ensure adequate sample sizes for every state. As a result, cross-state comparisons using multiple fact sheets may cover different time periods.

² Average daily participation data for school breakfast and lunch are reflective of April 2025. U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. (2025). State-level table current activity. Accessed September 24, 2025. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>

The following table identifies the school districts in each of **MARYLAND'S** congressional districts that contain CEP-eligible and participating schools, as well as the number of children enrolled in CEP schools for the 2024–2025 school year.³

School District	Number of CEP-Eligible Schools	Number of CEP-Participating Schools	Students Enrolled in CEP-Participating Schools
Congressional District #1			
BALTIMORE CO PUB SCH	174	174	111,000
CAROLINE CO PUB SCH	9	9	5,728
CECIL CO PUB SCH	31	14	6,233
DORCHESTER CO BOARD OF ED	11	11	4,614
HARFORD CO PUB SCH	26	17	11,022
KENT CO BRD OF ED	5	5	1,763
QUEEN ANNES COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION	9	0	
SOMERSET CO PUB SCH	7	7	2,893
TALBOT CO PUB SCH	8	0	
WICOMICO CO BRD OF ED	26	26	15,223
WORCESTER CO BRD OF ED	13	9	3,627
Congressional District #2			
BALTIMORE CITY PUB SCH	158	157	75,610
BALTIMORE CO PUB SCH	174	174	111,000
Congressional District #3			
HOWARD CO PUB SCH	32	11	5,179
Congressional District #4			
MONTGOMERY CO PUB SCH	123	61	36,607
PRINCE GEORGE'S CO. PUBLIC SCHOOL	188	132	86,807
Congressional District #5			
CHARLES COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	33	12	7,572
PRINCE GEORGE'S CO. PUBLIC SCHOOL	188	132	86,807
ST MARYS CO PUB SCH	18	3	1,478

School District	Number of CEP-Eligible Schools	Number of CEP-Participating Schools	Students Enrolled in CEP-Participating Schools
Congressional District #6			
ALLEGANY CO PUB SCH	24	24	8,132
FREDERICK CO PUB SCH	32	1	51
GARRETT CO PUB SCH	13	0	
MONTGOMERY CO PUB SCH	123	61	36,607
WASHINGTON CO PUB SCH	41	15	5,499
Congressional District #7			
BALTIMORE CITY PUB SCH	158	157	75,610
BALTIMORE CO PUB SCH	174	174	111,000
Congressional District #8			
MONTGOMERY CO PUB SCH	123	61	36,607
PRINCE GEORGE'S CO. PUBLIC SCHOOL	188	132	86,807
Unassigned School Districts			
Not all school districts could be matched to congressional districts due to data inconsistencies			
ANNE ARUNDEL CO PUB SCH	72	0	
ARCHDIOCESE OF BALTIMORE	8	8	1,969
BALTIMORE CO PUB SCH	1	0	
CALVERT CO PUB SCH	13	0	
CARROLL CO PUB SCH	13	0	
CHEDER CHABAD INC.	1	1	395
CONGREGATION OHEL LEVI YITZCHOK LUBAVITCH	1	0	
DON BOSCO CRISTO REY HIGH SCHOOL	1	0	
KENNEDY KRIEGER	1	0	
MARYLAND SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND	1	1	206
PHILLIPS PROGRAMS	1	0	
SEED SCHOOL OF MARYLAND	1	1	357
ST. IGNATIUS LOYOLA ACADEMY, INC	1	1	110
TORAH INSTITUTE OF BALTIMORE	1	0	

NOTE: School districts, rather than individual schools, are listed under congressional districts. If a school district crosses congressional district boundaries, all of their schools and children are included in each congressional district. Not all school districts could be matched to congressional districts due to inconsistencies in how the data sources numerically identify and name school districts and schools. Unmatched school districts are listed as unassigned.

³ Food Research & Action Center. (2025). Community Eligibility Provision database for the 2024–2025 school year. <https://frac.org/community-eligibility-database/>. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Common core of data for the 2023–2024 school year. <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/files.asp>; and NCES. School district geographic relationship files for the 119th Congress. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/geographic/relationshipfiles>