



# Maryland Hunger Solutions

*Ending hunger and promoting well-being*

February 18, 2026

## **SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENT FOR SB 311**

Education – The Blueprint for Maryland's Future – Revisions  
*Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee*

Greetings Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan and Members of the Committee.

Maryland Hunger Solutions 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 SB 311**, 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.

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



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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.

SB 311 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 SB 311 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 SB 311 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.

# SCHOOL MEALS SUPPORT CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND LEARNING

## Proposed Cuts to School Meals Would Worsen Childhood Hunger, Hurt Struggling Families, and Create Unnecessary Burdens for **393** Schools in **MARYLAND**

House Budget Committee Chair Jodey Arrington (R-TX) has proposed \$12 billion in cuts to school meals programs for the 2025 budget reconciliation. The proposals would substantially decrease the number of schools eligible for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and make it harder for eligible families to apply for free or reduced-price school meals at non-CEP schools. Combined, these proposals would reduce students' access to school meals and raise families' grocery bills, while imposing unnecessary and burdensome paperwork requirements on schools in **MARYLAND**.

### What Is Community Eligibility?

CEP allows schools serving large numbers of children from families with low incomes to offer school meals at no charge to all students. Rather than relying on school meal applications to determine a school's federal reimbursements, CEP schools are reimbursed based on the share of students from families with low incomes, as determined through a data-matching process that identifies students' participation in other means-tested programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Currently, schools can adopt CEP if at least 25 percent of students receive these benefits.

### CONGRESS MUST REJECT ANY PROPOSAL TO WEAKEN CEP

Chair Arrington's proposal would increase the CEP eligibility threshold for schools from **25** percent to **60** percent of students identified as receiving benefits. This would cut over 24,000 schools nationwide from participating in CEP and undermine the health and learning of more than **12 million children**.

### Community Eligibility Supports Students, Families, and Schools

CEP is a win for students, families, and schools. CEP gives all students access to the nutritious 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 has grown in popularity since first becoming available nationwide over a decade ago. In the 2023–2024 school year, one out of every two schools that operated the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) participated in CEP. CEP makes school meal operations more efficient and effective: It 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, which allows for economies of scale.



IN 2023–2024 SCHOOL YEAR

**651** SCHOOLS

in **MARYLAND** — which represents **46** percent of schools that participate in the school lunch program — adopted CEP, reaching **368,909** children each school day.

### The proposed cuts to school meals would **increase hardships** for children and families across **MARYLAND**:



**393**

**schools in MARYLAND** would no longer be able to provide free school meals through CEP and would have to reinstate meal applications.



**17**

**school districts in MARYLAND**, listed on the reverse page, would be affected.



**251,318**

**MARYLAND children** attend schools that would no longer be able to offer meals at no charge to all students through CEP.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than reducing access to school meals, **CONGRESS SHOULD INVEST IN CEP** and reduce barriers to applying for free or reduced-price school meals, so families can afford groceries and children have access to the nutritious meals they need to thrive in school and beyond.

The following table identifies the school districts in **MARYLAND**, and the number of schools and children within each district that would lose access to CEP if Congress increases the eligibility threshold to 60 percent of students identified as receiving benefits.

| School District               | Schools Impacted | Children Impacted |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| ALLEGANY CO PUB SCH           | 2                | 542               |
| BALTIMORE CITY PUB SCH        | 31               | 19234             |
| BALTIMORE CO PUB SCH          | 117              | 83106             |
| CAROLINE CO PUB SCH           | 7                | 4454              |
| CECIL CO PUB SCH              | 11               | 5162              |
| CHARLES COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS | 11               | 6923              |
| DORCHESTER CO BOARD OF ED     | 6                | 1771              |
| HARFORD CO PUB SCH            | 10               | 6459              |
| HOWARD CO PUB SCH             | 8                | 3667              |

| School District                   | Schools Impacted | Children Impacted |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| KENT CO BRD OF ED                 | 2                | 820               |
| MONTGOMERY CO PUB SCH             | 58               | 33993             |
| PRINCE GEORGE'S CO. PUBLIC SCHOOL | 100              | 69817             |
| SEED SCHOOL OF MARYLAND           | 1                | 401               |
| ST MARYS CO PUB SCH               | 1                | 539               |
| WASHINGTON CO PUB SCH             | 4                | 916               |
| WICOMICO CO BRD OF ED             | 17               | 10833             |
| WORCESTER CO BRD OF ED            | 7                | 2681              |