



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 971

Education - Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program - School Lunch

*Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
Senate Budget & Taxation Committee*

March 15, 2022

Maryland Hunger Solutions strongly supports SB 971, which aims to require schools receiving a per pupil grant under the Concentration of Poverty Grant Program to provide school meals to all children at no cost to them or their families using a combination of state and federal funding. This bill will also provide state funding to continue providing school meals at no cost to all students in Maryland during the 2022-2023 school year as they have been for the past two years under federal pandemic-related waivers.

As a statewide, non-partisan, nonprofit organization working to end hunger, improve nutrition, and promote the well-being of Marylanders in need, Maryland Hunger Solutions works to overcome existing barriers in state and federal nutrition assistance programs and create self-sustaining connections between Maryland residents and nutritious foods.

Among these programs, the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program play the most critical roles in directly addressing childhood food insecurity. [Multiple studies have linked participation in school meals to an incredible number of beneficial outcomes for students](#) including reduced food insecurity, decreased rates of obesity, improved overall nutrition and wellness, enhanced child development and school readiness, and improved academic achievement, attendance, and classroom behavior.

Over the past two years, even while classes met virtually and schools struggled to maintain a consistent learning model and schedule, the school meal programs have continued to serve as a critical resource to keep children fed during short- and long-term closures, alleviate child hunger, and advance racial equity and child well-being. This has been thanks to federal child nutrition waivers put in place by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which not only helped school and community meal sponsors to adequately respond to the fallout from COVID- 19, but also removed the cost to children and their families, allowing all students across Maryland and nationwide to access healthy school meals at no cost over the course of the past two school years. It's important to note that as our food system has struggled with supply chain challenges, school food and nutrition issues have not been exempted. But food and nutrition services have worked heroically to provide school meals to students across our state and our most impoverished students have benefited the most.

Unfortunately, these federal waivers are set to end in June 2022. And despite efforts to advocate for an extension of these waivers, Congress failed to include them in the recent omnibus appropriations package, making SB 971 more critical than ever to ensure Maryland has a safety net in place that will continue covering the cost of school meals through the next school year.



Maryland families and communities continue to need support, particularly Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous families who disproportionately lack reliable access to healthy meals. Additionally, school nutrition departments are still struggling to operate due to supply chain issues, staffing shortages, frequent school closures and the continued safety threat of new variants and COVID exposures. By continuing to fund healthy school meals for all across Maryland through the 2022-2023 school year, SB 971 will be making a smart and undeniably impactful investment in supporting school systems and Maryland families during this extended pandemic recovery process.

In addition to this short-term investment, SB 971 will also be making an effective change in the current school meal system, which perfectly complements and bolsters the educational resources allocated to community schools through the per pupil grant created by the 2019 Blueprint Bill for Maryland's Future (Blueprint Bill).

Despite the proven health and educational benefits of the school meal programs, the current tiered payment system prevents too many children from accessing healthy meals during the school day. While the free and reduced-price meal program exists to ensure low-income children receive the nutritional support they need, many families who struggle to meet their most basic needs do not apply or even qualify for this program. For example, a family of four living on just \$50,000 per year is ineligible for any support from this program. Additionally, the stigma that is inherent to a tiered payment system often prevents students and families who are eligible from taking advantage of the program, often resulting in burdensome school meal debt that negatively impacts school systems, low-income families, and their children.

SB 971 aims to permanently remove these barriers in high poverty community schools that are receiving a per pupil grant. The community school model being used in these schools already seeks to recognize and support the wellbeing of the whole child through wrap-around services such as school-based health centers, behavioral and mental health services, workforce development training, and other student enrichment experiences. Adding state funding dedicated to providing all children in these schools, regardless of income, with access to healthy meals will help ensure that every child is ready to learn and thrive and can take full advantage of the educational investments already made by the Blueprint Bill.

While we look forward to a day when every Maryland child receives the healthy meals they need to stay hunger free and ready to learn, SB 971 takes an important step in this direction by continuing school meal service at no cost through the 2022-2023 school year, and in high-poverty community schools permanently.

As such, we respectfully urge a favorable report on SB 971. Thank you for your consideration.