

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 857

Education - Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program - School Lunch

House Ways and Means Committee

March 3, 2022

I am Fania Yangarber, Executive Director of Healthy School Food Maryland®. I am testifying on behalf of the over 6,000 parents whom we represent and I am also testifying on behalf of the Food & Nutrition Subcommittee of the Montgomery County Council of Parent Teacher Associations (MCCPTA).

We strongly support HB 857, which aims to expand access to school meals by requiring schools receiving a per pupil grant under the Concentration of Poverty Grant Program to provide school lunch at no cost for all of their students and ensures that breakfast and lunch will remain free for all Maryland students during the 2022-2023 school year.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought increased attention to the unacceptably high number of Maryland families and students that struggle with food insecurity, which has only continued to grow over the past two years. However, the challenges we have faced in ensuring nutritious and fresh meals equitably across all Maryland schools are not new.

The expansion of free school meals to all students has been critical in addressing the lack of access to healthy food in schools that students in elementary through high schools have been dealing with for many years.

While it should be obvious why our state MUST invest in the health and nutrition of our students through school meals, data outlining the specific benefits of ensuring students have access to healthy schools meals include:

- improved academic achievement, standardized test scores, and cognitive function^{1 2};
- improved attendance, which is positively linked to academic achievement^{3 4};
- reduced food insecurity, which is linked to poor academic outcomes⁵;
- improved nutrition, such as increased consumption of fruit, vegetables, and milk⁶;
- improved overall health and long-term health outcomes, as well as reduction in obesity rates⁷;

¹ Ptomey, L. T., Steger, F. L., Schubert, M. M., Lee, J., Willis, E. A., Sullivan, D. K., Szabo-Reed, A. N., Washburn, R. A., & Donnelly, J. E. (2016). Breakfast intake and composition is associated with superior academic achievement in elementary schoolchildren. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26697955/>.

² Frisvold, D. E. (2015). Nutrition and cognitive achievement: an evaluation of the School Breakfast Program. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047272714002497>.

³ Murphy, J. M. (2007). Breakfast and learning: an updated review. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228638584_Breakfast_and_Learning_An_Updated_Review.

⁴ Basch, C. E. (2011). Breakfast and the achievement gap among urban minority youth. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21923876/>.

⁵ Huang, J., & Barnidge, E. (2016). Low-income children's participation in the National School Lunch Program and household food insufficiency. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26722983/>.

⁶ Clark, M. A., & Fox, M. K. (2009). Nutritional quality of the diets of U.S. public school children and the role of the school meal programs. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19166672/>.

⁷ Gunderson, C., Kreider, B., & Pepper, J. (2012). The impact of the National School Lunch Program on child health: a nonparametric bounds analysis. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0304407611001205>.

- particularly improvements in obesity rates, diet quality, food security, and academic performance in schools with universal free school meals^{8 9}

HB 857 aims to extend the coverage of school meals for all students statewide through the 2022-2023 school year, and to ensure that there is increased state funding for free school meals in high poverty schools, the same way our state has realized—through implementation of the 2019 Blueprint Bill for Maryland’s Future— that we need to provide better funding for programs like school-based health centers, behavioral and mental health services, workforce development training, in order to support equitable learning and achievement.

In my own **Rockville High School cluster**, over a third our student population qualify for Free and Reduced Meals. During the first 18 months of the pandemic, **Healthy School Food Maryland®** worked with the Montgomery County Food Security Task Force, coordinated by the Montgomery County Food Council and the Department of Health and Human Services, and with Montgomery County Public Schools to deliver over 100,000 pounds of fresh produce and 70,000 school meals directly to families. Our volunteers interacted directly with these communities, and it was clear that while the access that we were expanding during the most critical months of the pandemic was crucial, the need in the communities was high and didn’t end when HSFM’s intervention did. Consistent access to school meals is the minimum requirement to improve outcomes for underserved communities. HB 857 addresses access, and we believe this is a good beginning to ensuring nutrition security for Montgomery County’s and all of Maryland’s school children.

While our children’s schools are returning to in-person learning models, we face a continued threat of COVID-19 outbreaks, as well as things like inflation and supply chain and staffing issues, all of which mean that the food and nutrition services in our schools are not in any way “back to normal.” Many students and their families are also continuing to struggle with rising prices and financial insecurities brought about by the pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, too many children in Montgomery County’s 208 schools were left out of these benefits of access to nutritious food due to the current program structure. To qualify for free or reduced school meals, a student’s family must be living at or below 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, which translates to annual income of less than \$49,000 for a family of four for the 2021–2022 school year.¹⁰ Because the eligibility threshold for these programs are so low, many Maryland families who struggle financially to meet their most basic needs do not qualify, especially given the cost of living in many communities. In Montgomery County, where the area median income in 2020 was \$110,012, a significant number of students would not qualify for free school meals under the current system, but yet may be facing food insecurity due to the high cost of living and the significant economic and social challenges families face during this ongoing pandemic. A 2017 Montgomery County Food Council report

⁸ Andreyeva T, Sun X. (2021). Universal School Meals in the US: What Can We Learn from the Community Eligibility Provision? Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34444793/>

⁹ Cohen, Juliana F.W., Amelie A. Hecht, Gabriella M. McLoughlin, Lindsey Turner, and Marlene B. Schwartz. (2021). Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review. Available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2072-6643/13/3/911/htm>

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. (2021). Child Nutrition Programs: Income Eligibility Guidelines. Available at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2021-03-04/pdf/2021-04452.pdf>.

revealed that based on the cost of living in Montgomery County, it costs at least \$91,252 for a four-person family to afford the basic necessities, much higher than the \$24,300 Federal Poverty level.¹¹

During the past two years, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has provided waivers to schools across the country, allowing them to serve free school meals to all students. As Maryland begins to recover from the economic, social, and health impacts of the pandemic, this ability to serve all students nutritious meals, regardless of income needs to be extended.

Maryland has made strides in supporting equitable access to school meals by reimbursing additional funds for reduced price meals. A number of states—including California and Maine—have taken more significant steps to ensure the access provided during the pandemic is something that families can count on, and Maryland should do the same. Providing school meals at no cost to all students and families in the state for an additional school year is a smart and effective investment in Maryland communities during these difficult times. The consistent access to school meals provided during the pandemic should be made permanent and HB 857 is one step we can take now to address the significant gaps that have existed in providing access to the benefits of school meals.

As such, we urge a favorable report on HB 857 in order to support students, families, schools, and entire communities through the pandemic and beyond.

¹¹ A Food Secure Montgomery County: A 5-Year Strategic Plan (2017). Available at: https://assets.jhsph.edu/clf/mod_clfResource/doc/MoCo_Food-Security-Plan_2017_small.pdf