

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 857

Education - Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program - School Lunch

House Ways and Means Committee

March 3, 2022

We, the undersigned Maryland organizations and associations, write in support of HB 857, 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. 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 in the event that federal pandemic-related waivers are not extended.

Studies have long shown that school meals reduce childhood hunger, decrease childhood overweight and obesity, improve child nutrition and wellness, enhance child development and school readiness, and support learning, attendance, and behavior. More recent studies reaffirm that access to nutritious meals in school increases the long-term health and educational outcomes for children by helping to establish healthy eating habits from an early age.

Despite these proven benefits, the current system leaves too many children behind. While school meals remain one of the federal government's most powerful tools for delivering good nutrition to children, many families who struggle to meet their most basic needs do not qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. For example, a family of four living on just \$50,000 per year is ineligible for 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.

This bill aims to address these barriers in community schools receiving a per pupil grant under the Concentration of Poverty Grant Program created by the 2019 Blueprint Bill for Maryland's Future (Blueprint Bill). This funding is dedicated to helping schools with high concentrations of poverty to provide 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 to provide school meals in these schools at no cost to students is the perfect complement to the educational investments already made by the Blueprint Bill, supporting both schools and communities by eliminating school meal debt and the burden that it places on school systems, families, and children.

Additionally, HB 857 allocates some of Maryland's current budget surplus to providing school meals at no charge to any student across the state for one school year in the event that federal pandemic-related waivers are not extended. Currently, schools across the country are serving school meals at no cost because of federal child nutrition waivers that have been in place since early 2020. However, these waivers are currently set to end in June, 2022, and while Maryland schools have made strides toward returning to in-person learning, operations are still far from normal. Not only are communities and families still struggling with the economic impacts of the pandemic, but school systems and nutrition departments are also struggling with supply chain disruptions, threat of outbreaks and school closures, workforce challenges, and rising prices. Continuing to fund healthy school meals for all across Maryland

through the 2022-2023 school year will be undeniably impactful in supporting school systems and Maryland families during this extended pandemic recovery process.

We represent local and state organizations that see firsthand the impact of poverty and food insecurity in our state. We also know how life changing providing school meals at no cost could be for students, their families, schools, and communities.

Thank you for your leadership and we look forward to working with you to ensure that every child in this country receives the healthy food they need to stay hunger free and ready to learn.

Thank you for your consideration.

Maryland Hunger Solutions

NAACP Maryland State Conference

Maryland Coalition for Community Schools

SEIU Local 500

American Heart Association

Capital Area Food Bank

Healthy School Food Maryland

Anne Arundel County Food Bank

Crossroads Community Food Network