

<<WORKING DRAFT >>

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 857

Education - Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program - School Lunch

House Ways and Means Committee

March 3, 2022

My name is Brandy Brooks, and I am a resident of Kensington, MD. I 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.

I am a community organizer, a board member of the Montgomery County Renters Alliance, a candidate for Montgomery County Council, and an aunt of an MCPS student. I also have more than 10 years of experience working in food justice and community food systems in partnership with colleagues across the county. Ensuring that all Marylanders have equitable and consistent access to healthy food is imperative to support the health, educational, and economic success of our state's residents. Making sure that healthy meals are available to all students through our schools is a key way that our state can begin to address the racial and economic inequities in our food system.

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. Our state's high cost of living and challenges with access to consistent, healthy, stable and affordable housing means that many of us are overly cost-burdened by paying for housing. While exacerbated by the pandemic, 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 outline the specific benefits of ensuring students have access to healthy schools meals include:

- improved academic achievement, standardized test scores, and cognitive function^{1 2};

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>.

- 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;
- 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.

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 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

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 Gundersen, 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>.

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>.

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

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