

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 Amber Roberts, I am the mother of a 2nd grader and incoming Kindergartener at West Annapolis Elementary School. I currently serve on our elementary school's PTA board as the Secretary and have been an active PTA member for 3 years.

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. Additionally, this bill will support school systems, students, and their families as they recover from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by covering the cost of breakfast and lunch for all Maryland students during the 2022-2023 school year.

We know that 1 in 6 children experience food insecurity. School lunches protect MILLIONS of children's brains and bodies from hunger so they can learn. My oldest son attends an outwardly privileged elementary school with a FARMS rate of approximately 13%. In order to qualify for FARMS, a family of 4 would need to be at or below \$49,025.

We are leaving out a lot of middle class families. Just because a family isn't at or below what is considered the poverty line, doesn't mean they don't have crippling medical debt or have to pay hundreds of dollars out of pocket each month for mental health services. Every time we checkout at the grocery store, our bank accounts feel the effects of inflation. I can only imagine this is going to intensify over the coming months with the developing situation between Russia and Ukraine. Having universal free lunches is a step in the right direction to offset rising food prices, destigmatize school lunches, have nutrition accessible to ALL students, provide financial relief for many families and at the very least, give families one less thing to worry about. I was pleased to see the extension of these short-term waivers for the current school year, but we're a little over 3 months away from cessation of the program. Without a permanent solution to provide free meals to all students, schools will eventually have to revert to the old process where only SOME kids get to eat for free. The pandemic has shown us that universal free school lunches work. We cannot go backwards.

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.