



March 1, 2022

Testimony of Laura Hale

American Heart Association

Support of HB 857- Education - Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program - School Lunch

Dear Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Washington and Members of the Ways and Means Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before the committee today. The American Heart Association extends its support for House Bill 857 - Education - Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program - School Lunch. My name is Laura Hale and I am the Director of Government Relations for the American Heart Association.

Access to nutritious healthy food is essential for long term heart health. Unfortunately, too many Maryland students do not have money for school breakfast and lunch. This legislation begins important to bridge the gap, making sure Maryland students get both a healthy breakfast and lunch. When kids have healthy meals they are better able to grow and learn. School meals are critical for students experiencing food and nutrition insecurity at home as they provide the healthy calories kids need to learn and grow¹.

Programs that provide healthy school meals for all help reduce students' experiences with food and nutrition insecurity². This legislation also takes important steps to include the Community Eligibility Provision. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) not only allows for more students eat a healthy school meal, it also reduces the paperwork and bureaucracy for school food service workers. This provides school nutrition professionals more time to do what they do best – to prepare healthy, appealing meals for students³.

The steps taken during the COVID-19 pandemic to extend school lunch and breakfast programs in Maryland have been essential for many families and we urge the state to continue to provide this key investment in our children.

The American Heart Association urges a favorable report on House Bill 857 to support the health our children.

¹ Forrestal S, Potamites E, Guthrie J, Paxton N. Associations among food security, school meal participation, and students' diet quality in the first school nutrition and meal cost study. *Nutrients*. 2021; 13: 307. doi: 10.3390/nu13020307

² Cohen JF, Hect AA, McLoughlin GM, Turner L, Schwartz MB. Universal school meals and associations with student participation, attendance, academic performance, diet quality, food security, and body mass index: a systematic review. *Nutrients*. 2021; 13:911. doi: 10.3390/nu13030911.

³ U.S. Department of Agriculture; Food and Nutrition Service. Community Eligibility Provision Evaluation. February 2014. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/CEPEvaluation.pdf>. Hecht AA, Neff RA, Kelley TL, Pollack Porter KM. Universal free school meals through the Community Eligibility Provision: Maryland food service provider perspectives. *JAFSCD*. 2021; 10: 529-550. doi: 10.5304/jafscd.2021.102.033