
Written Testimony Submitted for the Record to the
Maryland House of Delegates
House Ways and Means Committee
For the Hearing on
House Bill 857 (HB 857)
Education - Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program - School Lunch
March 3, 2022

SUPPORT

Free State PTA represents over 34,000 volunteer members and families in over 500 public schools. Free State PTA is composed of families, students, teachers, administrators, and business as well as community leaders devoted to the educational success of children and family engagement in Maryland.

Free State PTA strongly supports 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 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought increased attention to the unacceptably high number of Maryland families that struggle with food insecurity, which has only continued to grow over the past two years. As hundreds of thousands of Maryland children and families begin the long process of recovery from the social and economic impacts of the pandemic, there has never been a more important time to make significant investments in the school meal programs.

Extensive research has linked participation in school meals to several benefits:

- improved academic achievement, standardized test scores, and cognitive function ¹;
- improved attendance, which is positively linked to academic achievement ²;
- reduced food insecurity, which is linked to poor academic outcomes³;
- improved nutrition, such as increased consumption of fruit, vegetables, and milk⁴;
- improved overall health and long-term health outcomes, as well as reduction in obesity rates, anxiety, and depression⁵.

However, as vital as school meals are to ensuring students have access to healthy, nutritious meals, too many children in need are left out due to the current program structure. To qualify for free 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 \$35,000 for a family

¹ 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>.

² Basch, C. E. (2011). Breakfast and the achievement gap among urban minority youth. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21923876/>.

³ 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/>.

⁴ 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/>.

⁵ 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>.

The mission of PTA is to make every child's potential a reality by
engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children.

of four for the 2021–2022 school year⁶. Similarly, a family of four must have an annual income of around \$49,000 or less to qualify for reduced-price meals. Because the eligibility threshold for these programs is so low, many Maryland families who struggle financially to meet their most basic needs do not qualify. 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.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report for HB857.

Respectfully,

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⁶ 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>.

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