

## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 857

Education - Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program - School Lunch

*House Ways and Means Committee*

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### **Susan M. Gross, PhD, MPH, RDN, LDN**

My name is Susan Gross. I am a nutritionist and an associate scientist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and I strongly support House Bill 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.

One strategy to bolster our child nutrition safety net is to expand access to the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), a school meal funding option that allows schools to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students – essentially becoming Hunger-Free Schools. This bill will require all schools receiving the Concentration of Poverty Grant Program to adopt CEP if eligible.

Since 2015, I have been evaluating the impact of CEP. This research included speaking with school administrators, parents and students in Maryland about issues related to food insecurity. One of the consistent themes was that families of students who could not pay for the school meals and did not qualify for free meals often had trouble with coming up with the money for school provided meals on a regular basis.

These Maryland students complained of experiencing shaming in the cafeteria when they did not decide to skip a meal so as not to be identified by their peers as poor or needy. Skipping meals has been associated with poor academic performance and increased risk of behavioral issues.<sup>1</sup>

After the adoption of the community eligibility provision by the Baltimore City Public Schools administration, it was found that students attending Baltimore City Public Schools were nearly three times less likely to be food insecure, as compared to students attending a CEP eligible, but nonparticipating school – even after adjusting for race/ethnicity and education level of the adult.<sup>2</sup>

With universally free school meals, student will have the security of knowing that at least two meals are available to them each school day and will provide the security and stability they will need to learn and grow.

Maryland has the opportunity to reduce food insecurity, meal debt shaming and stigmatization of Maryland Community School students and expand the availability of universally free meals through HB 857.

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.

*The opinions expressed herein are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Johns Hopkins University.*

Thank you for the opportunity to express my thoughts.

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<sup>1</sup> Müller K, et al. Eur J Clin Nutr. 2013 Feb;67(2):185-9.

<sup>2</sup> Gross S et al. J Hunger Envir Nutr Oct 2019 <https://doi.org/10.1080/19.320248.2019.1679318>