

BILL: House Bill 857
TITLE: Education – Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program – School Lunch
DATE: March 3, 2022
POSITION: OPPOSE
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means Committee
CONTACT: John R. Woolums, Esq.

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) opposes House Bill 857.

First, MABE is committed to and strongly supports both the continued expansion of student access to nutritious school meals, and to the expansion of the community schools program launched in advance of and through the Blueprint for Maryland's Future Act. However, MABE is generally opposed to proposals to mandate the expansion of Blueprint programs, or to impose costs not anticipated under the Blueprint. House Bill 857 would do so, by mandating universal free meals in all community schools.

MABE certainly recognizes the importance of developing healthy school environments, which includes providing high quality health and physical education programs as well as meeting the nutritional needs of students through school breakfasts, lunches, afterschool meals, and vending machine policies. Local boards support this legislation because it would provide additional state funding to ensure a universally free school meal program for more students. These programs and services are, of course, critically important to be provided in community schools in communities experiencing concentrated poverty.

Local boards of education are joining advocates for ending childhood hunger and promoting the health and learning of students in strong support for this legislation. The funding provided by this legislation is needed to address the problem that many low-income students are not able to participate in the school meal programs because their household income is too high to qualify for free meals, yet too low to afford the reduced-price school meal co-pays. As a result, reduced-price eligible students are more likely to incur go without the regular meals they need; and significantly less likely to eat school meals compared to students that qualify for free school meals.

The federal child nutrition law, entitled the "The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act," has mandated major reforms in school meal programs to improve the nutritional value of the meals served to Maryland students each day. In addition to federal reforms, Maryland has enacted several meaningful programs to enhance student access to breakfasts, lunches, and after school options, and partnerships to help ensure daily access to healthy food for all students.

However, MABE respectfully requests that the legislature not enact prescriptive mandates in addition to those included in the Blueprint for Maryland's Future Act, including the Community Schools program, until implementation plans and aligned budgets are adopted.

For these reasons, MABE requests an unfavorable report on House Bill 857.