

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 857

Education - Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program - School Lunch

House Ways and Means Committee

March 3, 2022

[Maria Yu/Rockville/Healthy School Food MD) (Richard Montgomery High School)]

Good afternoon, my name is Maria Yu and I am a freshman at Richard Montgomery High School. Today, I am testifying in favor of something that will be an effective investment in all Maryland communities: the state funded universal free meals that HB 857 calls for.

Prior to the pandemic, too many children in public schools were left out of these benefits of access to nutritious food due to the current program structure. Because the eligibility threshold for these programs are so low, many families who struggle financially to meet their most basic needs do not qualify.

For me, as a student of one of Maryland's public schools, I am a witness to how free lunches have benefitted students. Many of our families are continuing to face economic and financial challenges, as unemployment rates have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Evidently, universally free lunch meals have lifted a huge financial burden for many families across the state. However, it has also lifted an emotional and mental burden. Although the Free and Reduced Meals program is common in districts across our state, a stigma surrounding it is also consistent. Many students are terrified of being discovered that their family needs financial aid. Cases of extreme bullying and harassment are not new concepts that have arisen due to one's socioeconomic status. To clarify, I am not saying that this is a bad program, however, I am urging you to consider the benefits that will come with the passing of this bill as it will also lessen the anxiety that comes with the current program in place.

A number of states have taken significant steps to ensure the access provided during the pandemic is something that families can count on, and Maryland should do the same. When it is common knowledge of how detrimental it can be to students academically and health-wise when they skip their meals, is it fair to say that those students are receiving an equitable education?