

TO: Members of the Appropriations Committee

FROM: STEP- (BCC)

My name is Riley Nee, submitting this testimony in support of HB 514, the Maryland Meals for Achievement In-Classroom Breakfast Program, which would ensure that Maryland would provide breakfast and lunch to all students attending low-income schools.

I am a member of Students to End Poverty, which is a student-run organization based in Montgomery County. Our mission is to advance policy on a state and local level that looks after the interests of lower-income Marylanders. We have advocated for the Blueprint for Maryland's Future bill, helped create the Maryland Student Investment Act, and supported Del. Solomon's affordable housing efforts.

Through these efforts, the importance of a quality K-12 education has become apparent. HB514 is a vital step towards creating an equitable playing field in Maryland.

In a structurally flawed educational system that puts low-income students at an academic disadvantage, no student should face further obstacles in the form of food insecurity. Maryland's school systems have the capacity to ease the burden placed on these students through providing all students with free breakfast and lunch. It is imperative that we take the action necessary to ensure all students are given the necessary opportunities to succeed in the classroom and beyond.

According to a Harvard health publication, 95% of your serotonin is produced in your gastrointestinal tract. Though no secret that bad moods can coincide with missed meals, science directly links the food consumed by a student's body to their emotional state. In school children- this manifestation is even more extreme. In elementary school I was lucky enough to have parents who made my lunch, and always made sure I ate. This was not the case for many of the kids in my class. A picky eater- and friend of mine would always nibble at the school-issued lunch he had every day. He always seemed a little sad, and not fully present. I recall sharing apple slices, or grapes with him. I didn't connect his demeanor to his lunch situation then, but looking back, I wish I had my mom make two healthy lunches for me to bring to school.

A Stanford study regarding opportunity gaps presents that the difference in family incomes now corresponds to a 30 to 60 percent larger difference in academic achievement than it did for children born in the 1970s. Now- it's more important than ever for our low-income students to have nutritious meals in school. Meals they may not be receiving at home, having food at school is crucial for these students. Opportunity gaps already put these students at a disadvantage to their higher income, privileged peers, and we can't let having access to food and fuel for their day at school become yet another unequal obstacle they are faced with.

In light of these facts, I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on HB514.

Thank you,

Riley Nee
Bethesda Chevy Chase HS

Students to End Poverty (STEP)