

Expanding Maryland Meals for Achievement Would Feed More Students

Given before the House Appropriations Committee

Position Statement in Support of House Bill 514

Free breakfast offered at school is often the only way many Maryland children are able to get a healthy start to the day. Maryland Meals for Achievement (MMFA) helps schools where 40 percent or more of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals by giving all students an adequate opportunity to eat a healthy breakfast. Eating breakfast is essential to helping children succeed in school and, in turn, helps Maryland's long-term economic success.ⁱ However, due to limited funding, many schools that are eligible and apply to participate in the program are not able to. House Bill 514 would ensure that there is funding each year for MMFA to reach more students who need breakfast. **For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports House Bill 514.**

In the traditional school breakfast program model, breakfast is served before the start of the school day. However, due to transportation issues, such as school bus routes and family schedules, many students do not arrive in school on time to eat breakfast before the first bell. As a result, those students stay hungry for the rest of the morning despite having access to free breakfast at their school.

Low-income students may also face stigma when participating in the free breakfast program, which may deter them from getting the food and nutrition they need. Maryland Meals for Achievement has helped alleviate both of these issues by providing all students' access to breakfast free of charge after the first bell so that more of them can start the day off right.

Currently, 581 schools are participating in the MMFA up from 485 schools which participated in school year 2018-2019. ⁱⁱ However, there are 618 public schools in Maryland that qualify for the program, excluding schools that are able to provide free school meals to all students through the Community Eligibility Provision. Maryland should continue to increase funding for this program so that more qualifying schools can participate and serve more students.

Ensuring that students who need it have access to meals at school is an effective way for Maryland to help struggling families make ends meet. Providing funding for more eligible schools to participate in Maryland Meals for Achievement program would feed more students. Studies show that students who regularly eat breakfast perform better academically, have fewer behavioral problems, which ultimately helps ensure that students stay in school and earn the diplomas they need to go onto higher education or enter the workforce. Maryland is especially dependent on skilled and highly educated workers, so it is essential we're doing everything we can to ensure the success of the next generation of Maryland workers.

For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy respectfully requests that the Appropriations Committee give a favorable report to House Bill 514.

Equity Impact Analysis: House Bill 514

Bill summary

House Bill 514 would increase the annual appropriation for the Maryland Meals for Achievement program to \$12 million. If approved, House Bill 514 would ensure that all eligible schools can participate in the program.

Background

The Maryland Meals for Achievement program provides breakfast in the classroom for all students at no cost to their family. A school is eligible when at least 40 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. During this current school year, 581 schools currently participate in the program. However, there are 618 public schools in Maryland that qualify for the program, excluding schools that are able to provide free school meals to all students through the Community Eligibility Provision. Despite having access to free breakfast, many students cannot arrive to school in time to eat breakfast and those students will stay hungry for the rest of the morning. Schools that have been able to participate in the program have reported significantly higher participation in their breakfast program. As a result, these schools have seen improvement in student attendance as well as improvement in student behavior. Maryland should continue to increase funding for this program so that more qualifying schools can participate and serve more students.

Equity Implications

Due to transportation issues such as school bus routes and family schedules, many students do not arrive at school in time to eat breakfast before the first bell. Additionally, low-income students may also face stigma when participating in the free breakfast program, which may deter them from getting the food and nutrition they need. When kids forgo eating breakfast, they remain hungry for the remainder of the morning and this can directly impact their academic performance. Data shows that students of color benefit the most from school meal programs. Maryland ensuring that students who need it have access to meals at school is an effective way to help struggling Marylanders.

Impact

House Bill 514 would likely **improve racial and economic equity** in Maryland.

ⁱ Food Research and Action Center, Research Brief: Breakfast For Learning <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforlearning-1.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Maryland Hunger Solutions, Maryland Meals for Achievement. <https://www.mdhungersolutions.org/federal-nutrition-programs/school-breakfast-program-sbp/maryland-meals-for-achievement/>