

February 24, 2023

FAVORABLE

TO: Members of the House Economic Matters Committee

FROM: Valerie Hoang

My name is Valerie Hoang, 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. At Northwest High School in Germantown, our Students to End Poverty chapter is especially focused on advancing educational equity by addressing the disparities among our communities. 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 by 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.

Between 2009-2010, the percentage of children and adolescents between 2-19 years who did not consume breakfast on any day remained consistent, per the CDC. By providing funding to low-income schools in Maryland for breakfasts and lunches, students will not only benefit physically - now having the energy they need to be as successful as they can in school - but mentally as well. In research conducted by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), it was found that offering breakfast in the classroom at no cost led students to experience a greater sense of unity and reduced stigma associated with eating at breakfast school. Maryland's school system should strive to achieve this community among its students; a school should be a safe environment for all students in all aspects, especially for those experiencing food insecurity. It is simply inequitable that students at lower-income schools are at a disadvantage due to the lack of funding for food programs. Food is a right and a must to ensure equitable experiences in school.

While I have the privilege of making breakfast for myself in the morning, for many of my peers, it is not possible. Some students have families they must care for in the morning, more strenuous commutes to school, or difficult situations at home. Not everyone has access to breakfast every morning. Oftentimes, students will come late to my morning classes because they have to go out and get breakfast for themselves. Plus, when I don't have breakfast, I experience a loss of energy and do not feel at my best to succeed in my morning classes. Imagine these experiences for a whole school community - such factors do not promote equity or a welcoming environment in school. Not providing universal funding for food programs at low-income schools places students at a disadvantage and only further widens the disparities in our school system and the education gap. For the well-being of students in Maryland, we must

acknowledge the variety of backgrounds that people here come from, and recognize the importance of breakfast in creating a more equitable school environment for the success of students.

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

Thank you,

Valerie Hoang

Northwest High School

Students to End Poverty (STEP)