

TO: House Economic Matters Committee, and members of the Appropriations Committee

FROM: Students To End Poverty (STEP)

My name is Kevin Nguyen, 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 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.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in the fall of 2019, over 24% of students attending public schools were attending high-poverty schools. About 40% of students who attended city schools were in high-poverty schools. For our 50 states and the District of Columbia, only 20% of students attended low-poverty schools which varied greatly with race. For example, 30% of White students attend low-poverty schools, but for Hispanic and Black students, only 7% of Black students attend low-poverty schools and 8% for Hispanic students. We must also take into account the other responsibilities students face such as jobs and studying, lacking the nutrients required to efficiently fulfill these too. It's become clear that there are barriers within these lower-income schools that students must overcome in order to thrive as a student. A student shouldn't have to worry about receiving the basic and vital nutrients gained from breakfast and lunch when attending school. The Food Research & Action Center explains that research has shown that receiving free or reduced lunches reduces food insecurity, obesity rates, and poor health.

The impact of students attending low-income schools not receiving breakfast and lunch is a problem that creates an educational barrier for low-income students, creating divisions within our community. They're not able to receive the basic nutrients required from them in order to think critically, problem solve, and cooperate with their teacher. A student should not have to worry about their income in order to have a great education and a nutritious meal. HB 514 would solve this problem directly, providing low-income students with the healthy and nutritional meals they require in order to thrive as a student for both breakfast and lunch. It's evident how vital meals in school are for Maryland students, this should not be a barrier for lower-income students.

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

Thank you,
Kevin Nguyen
John F. Kennedy
Students to End Poverty (STEP)