

FAVORABLE

TO: Member of the House Economic Matters Committee

FROM: Lizzie Gardiner

My name is Lizzie Gardiner, 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 (STEP), 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. In accordance with the United Nations International Children's Emergency (UNICEF), children across the world are suffering as a result of not receiving enough food to support their diet. UNICEF states that this malnutrition results in poor brain development, inability to retain knowledge, and decreased immune system function.

Providing students with free breakfast specifically before school does help children and families who are unable to provide their own groceries and meals. However, it has been proven that this practice results in a stigma around these families and has created an immense amount of mental health issues for children. By separating children who must eat a free breakfast provided by the school from kids that are able to eat at home results in feelings of food insecurity and isolation for a child. A child who eats alone separated from others will inevitably have mental health affliction from these intense feelings. Food insecurity is a large problem which results in many children simply refusing to eat so that they are not isolated from their classmates and judged because of it. HB514 would eradicate this problem, as breakfast would be a free meal for children served after the bell in classrooms. Children would be able to eat their breakfast with their friends and classmates, rather than alone at a table. This would boost a child's mental health because they will no longer struggle with feelings of isolation from their friends simply because of their families financial afflictions. HB514 would reduce a child's food insecurity and would diminish a child's feeling of loneliness when they eat a free breakfast in school.

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

Thank you,

Lizzie Gardiner
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Students to End Poverty (STEP)