

February 18, 2023

FAVORABLE

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

FROM: Joseph Hartlove

My name is Joseph Hartlove, 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 Feeding America, a United States-based nonprofit organization, approximately one in eight American children are at risk of hunger. However, some estimate this number to be even higher, demonstrating the magnitude to which this issue affects families across our country. Being that approximately 18% of students qualify for free lunch at my school, I've heard complaints from some of my peers regarding trying to function on an empty stomach. Hunger is an issue that impacts my school, and, despite being ranked as one of the wealthiest counties in the country, it is an issue that exists in every high school where I live in Montgomery County to a certain extent. In addition, fighting hunger goes beyond just lunch, as I strongly believe that it takes more than one meal a day to be healthy and functioning. Therefore, I believe that it is important that we ensure that all students in low-income schools have access to free breakfast after the bell rings in the morning to accommodate factors such as students being late to school or long lines.

Unfortunately, hunger is an issue that has become ingrained in some communities. For example, according to the Maryland Department of Education, in Baltimore City during the 2016 to 2017 school year, over 80% of students qualified for free or reduced lunches. This equates to around a startling 74,461 children. I believe that it is essential that these communities are not neglected, and I believe that allowing ALL students attending low-income schools to participate in free breakfast in the classroom after the school bell in the morning is a vital step in ensuring this.

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

Thank you,

Joseph Hartlove
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Students to End Poverty (STEP)