

February 8, 2023

FAVORABLE

TO: Members of the House Economic Matters Committee

FROM: Masuoda Saduzai

My name is Masuoda Saduzai, submitting this testimony in support of HB 514, the Maryland Meals for Achievement In-Classroom Breakfast Program, which would ensure that Maryland would increase funds to provide breakfast to all students attending low-income schools.

I am a member of Students to End Poverty, a student-run organization based in the Montgomery County area. Our mission is to advance policy on a state and local level that looks after the interests of lower-income Marylanders, and to engage in direct service initiatives to support low-income members of our community. 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 education 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 provide a nutritious breakfast to all students, and to erase the stigma created by free and reduced price meals. It is imperative that we take the action necessary to ensure all students are given the resources necessary to succeed in the classroom and beyond.

Food is a basic need. A lack of nourishment can range in disadvantages from poor academic performances in kids and adults and even higher rates of mental health issues, as students worry about where and when they will eat their next meal. Our country has always been proud of the "American dream", the idea that anyone can succeed through hard work and self-determination. Failing to feed public school students is fundamentally incompatible with that aspiration.

I grew up in Queens, New York, where my family regularly relied on food stamps to make ends meet. Without those benefits, I don't know if I would be here right now, submitting a letter to the members of the house economic matters committee. I attended Public School 244 and there, food would be offered to every single student at no cost, regardless of their income. This policy meant that students were attending class nourished, focusing on the lesson and not when they would next be fed. The universality of the program ensured that there was no stigma associated with eating a school meal. Everyone did.

In 2020, pandemic-era food assistance allowed students to receive food benefits by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Otherwise known as SNAP). Establishing this bill helped not just my family, but thousands of families all over New York City. Especially during the pandemic, I worried less about whether there was going to be anything on the dinner table at night.

Recently, the New York City Department of Education announced that every student, regardless of family income, will receive free breakfast and lunch. I don't just believe, but know that this bill will help reduce the stigma associated with free meals, greatly benefitting Maryland students. Students should not be ashamed whenever they look down at their plate. All they should see is a nutritious meal provided by the state. Schools serve as our second home, a place where we eat, learn, and build community. It is a violation of this spirit to deny hungry students all the resources they need. The legislature should work to

remove barriers between a student and their education, not to perpetuate them. If New York already established free school food services for every individual, regardless of income, then why can't the state of Maryland do the same thing?

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

Thank you,

Masuoda Saduzai
Northwest High School
Students to End Poverty