



MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND
WOMEN'S DEMOCRATIC CLUB

P.O. Box 34047, Bethesda, MD 20827

www.womensdemocraticclub.org

Senate Bill 557
Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion
Budget and Taxation Committee – February 22, 2023
SUPPORT

Thank you for this opportunity to submit written testimony concerning an important priority of the **Montgomery County Women's Democratic Club (WDC)** for the 2023 legislative session. WDC is one of Maryland's largest and most active Democratic Clubs with hundreds of politically active members, including many elected officials.

WDC urges the passage of SB0557. This bill aims to provide state funding to expand access to free school breakfast and lunch to all students in schools participating in the National School Lunch or School Breakfast Program.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought increased attention to the unacceptably high number of Maryland families that struggle with food insecurity, especially among communities of color, with Black and Latino families with children reporting food insecurity twice as often as White households.ⁱ This bill requiring universal meals for all students will create an equal playing field and will help reduce food insecurity for thousands of students.

In addition to addressing the immediate need to reduce child hunger, universal free school meals are an essential investment for the health and academic success of Maryland students. Children who are hungry lack focus which results in poor academic performance. For example, food insecure children show smaller gains in math and reading achievement between kindergarten and third grade, and, from ages six to eleven, face a higher likelihood of repeating a grade, according to a report by the Governor's Office for Children.ⁱⁱ There is also strong research tying school meal participation to several positive outcomes for children, including: improved proficiency on standardized tests, reduced chronic absenteeism, and fewer disciplinary concerns.ⁱⁱⁱ

Numerous studies show that school meals are not only crucial for children's cognitive development but are also critical to overall health and wellness of children.^{iv} School meals programs support and improve student physical and mental health, including weight-related outcomes. For instance, school meal programs have been shown to reduce rates of poor health by at least 29 percent and rates of obesity by at least 17 percent, based on estimates using national data.^v Data also shows an association between school breakfast participation and lower body mass index (BMI) and positive impacts on mental health, including reductions in behavioral problems, anxiety, and depression.^{vi}

However, as vital as school meals are to ensuring students have access to healthy, nutritious meals, too many children in need are left out due to the current program structure. To qualify for free school meals, a student's family must be living at or below 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, which translates to annual income of less than \$36,000 for a family of four for the 2021– 2022 school year.^{vii} Similarly, a family of four must have an



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annual income of around \$52,000 or less to qualify for reduced-price meals. Because the eligibility threshold for these programs is so low, many Maryland families who struggle financially to meet their most basic needs do not qualify. Since 2020, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) provided waivers to schools across the country, allowing them to serve free school meals to all students. Those waivers have now expired and a critical nutritional resource for children and families as they continue to experience economic hardship has come to an end. As Maryland begins to recover from the economic, social, and health impacts of the pandemic, the ability to serve all students nutritious meals, regardless of income eligibility, needs to continue and SB0557 proposes to do just that.

We need to remove barriers for all Maryland students to ensure their potential is not limited by hunger. By providing school meals at no cost to all students, Maryland would be supporting equity in the classroom and making sure every child has the nutrition they need in order to excel. These meals are important to students' academic success just as textbooks or transportation are and should be treated as a critical component to education. Adding state funding to provide school meals in these schools at no cost to students is the perfect complement to the educational investments already made by the Blueprint Bill, supporting both schools and communities by eliminating school meal debt and the burden that it places on school systems, families, and children.

Passing this bill will ensure that every child in the state has access to a nutritious school breakfast and lunch every day, which is a smart and effective investment in Maryland's communities and future. Thank you for your consideration.

We ask for your support for SB0557 and strongly urge a favorable Committee report.

Diana E. Conway
WDC President

Tazeen Ahmad
WDC Advocacy Committee

ⁱ <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/news/2020/food-insecurity-by-race-ethnicity.html>

ⁱⁱ https://goc.maryland.gov/childhood-hunger/#_ftnref1

ⁱⁱⁱ Ending Childhood Hunger: A Social Impact Analysis, bestpractices.nokidhungry.org

^{iv} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021 "Childhood Nutrition Facts"

^v Gundersen, C., Kreider, B., & Pepper, J. (2012). The impact of the National School Lunch Program on child health: a nonparametric bounds analysis. *Journal of Econometrics*, 166, 79–91.

^{vi} <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning.pdf>

^{vii} U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. (2022). Child Nutrition Programs: Income Eligibility Guidelines. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/fr-021622>.