

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 557

Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion

Senate Budget & Taxation Committee

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I strongly support SB 557, which aims to expand access to school meals by providing state funds to cover the cost of school breakfast and school lunch for all students in schools participating in the National School Lunch or School Breakfast Program. This legislation is an essential investment for the health and academic success of Maryland students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought increased attention to the unacceptably high number of Maryland families that struggle with food insecurity, a number which has remained alarmingly elevated over the past three years. As hundreds of thousands of Maryland children and families continue down the long road to recovery from the social and economic impacts of the pandemic, there has never been a more important time to make significant investments in the school meal programs.

Extensive research has linked participation in school meals to a number of benefits:

- improved academic achievement, standardized test scores, and cognitive function^{1 2 3};
- improved attendance, which is positively linked to academic achievement^{4 5};
- reduced food insecurity, which is linked to poor academic outcomes⁶;
- improved nutrition, such as increased consumption of fruit, vegetables, and milk⁷;

¹ Vaisman, N., Voet, H., Akivis, A., & Vakil, E., (1996). Effects of Breakfast Timing on Cognitive Functions of Elementary School Students. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/8859144/>.

² Ptomey, L. T., Steger, F. L., Schubert, M. M., Lee, J., Willis, E. A., Sullivan, D. K., Szabo-Reed, A. N., Washburn, R. A., & Donnelly, J. E. (2016). Breakfast intake and composition is associated with superior academic achievement in elementary schoolchildren. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26697955/>.

³ Frisvold, D. E. (2015). Nutrition and cognitive achievement: an evaluation of the School Breakfast Program. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047272714002497>.

⁴ Murphy, J. M. (2007). Breakfast and learning: an updated review. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228638584_Breakfast_and_Learning_An_Updated_Review.

⁵ Basch, C. E. (2011). Breakfast and the achievement gap among urban minority youth. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21923876/>.

⁶ Huang, J., & Barnidge, E. (2016). Low-income children's participation in the National School Lunch Program and household food insufficiency. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26722983/>.

⁷ Clark, M. A., & Fox, M. K. (2009). Nutritional quality of the diets of U.S. public school children and the role of the school meal programs. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19166672/>.

- improved overall health and long-term health outcomes, as well as reduction in obesity rates, anxiety, and depression^{8 9}.

Marylanders need this investment. During the 2020 and 2021 school years, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has provided waivers to schools across the country, allowing school meals to be served at no cost to all students across the country, ensuring that every student had access to these important benefits. However, now that these waivers have ended, we have returned to a tiered payment system that leaves too many children out by allowing them to fall through the cracks. For example, 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 year¹⁰. Similarly, a family of four must have an annual income of around \$52,000 or less to qualify for reduced-price meals. With the cost of living on the rise, there are too many Maryland families who struggle financially to meet their most basic needs and yet do not qualify because their income exceeds this incredibly low eligibility threshold.

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. When students are distracted by hunger because they were unable to afford school breakfast or lunch, they miss out on the chance to learn and benefit from the important opportunities offered by Maryland's education system.

Hungry kids can't learn. Ensuring that every child in the state has access to a nutritious school breakfast and lunch every day is a smart and effective investment in Maryland's communities and future.

As such, I thank you for your consideration and urge a favorable report on SB 557.

⁸ Gundersen, C., Kreider, B., & Pepper, J. (2012). The impact of the National School Lunch Program on child health: a nonparametric bounds analysis. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0304407611001205>.

⁹ Kleinman, R. E., Hall, S., Green, H., Korzec-Ramirez, D., Patton, K., Pagano, M. E., & Murphy, J. M. (2002). Diet, breakfast, and academic performance in children. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12428078/>.

¹⁰ 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>.