

Before the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
SB557 Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion
SUPPORT

Dear Members of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee,

First and foremost, thank you for taking the time to read this testimony. I am in support of SB557 (Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion).

My name is Parim Shah, and I am a secondary student attending Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, a Maryland public school. The universal meals standard that would be set by SB557 is vital in the fight against not only food insecurity but also educational inequity and the achievement gap. Ensuring free, healthy, and accessible breakfast and lunch for every student will improve educational outcomes for low-income students, reduce food insecurity, and restore an extremely beneficial pandemic-era policy.

Universal meals will markedly improve educational outcomes, especially for low-income and food-insecure students. Healthy school meals with rich nutritional value are necessary for a student to succeed as most get **half of their daily calories** from school meals. Furthermore, disproportionately, low-income and underprivileged students are academically affected by a lack of universal meals, making this an **issue of educational equity**. I've personally talked to and seen several students at my school who are not able to eat lunch and/or breakfast and have a hard time completing assignments and taking tests largely because of a lack of nutrition. Under a universal meal standard, access to food will not be a barrier to academic success as it is now.

Moreover, passing SB557 is an essential step forward in combating food insecurity in Maryland. At the present moment, nearly **200 thousand children are food insecure**, an embarrassing statistic. Without action to combat the issue of food insecurity, the number of food-insecure children is only going to grow, and **schools play a crucial role in combating the issue**. The meals that they provide are in some cases the only nutritional food students get on a daily basis. As a state, making sure no child goes home hungry should be a top priority.

A universal meal standard has also proven to be deeply beneficial in schools across Maryland and the nation, both anecdotally and statistically. The no-income limit and no-cost federal government universal meals funding kept millions of children from going hungry during the pandemic. Families across the country had an **80% reduction in food insecurity risk** because of the federal universal meals funding. Many classmates and I have greatly benefited from that funding. I saw **students who would've otherwise not eaten during the day, eat when there were universally free meals**. This happens because of the reduced stigma of a no-income limit and no-cost universal meals standard. The fiscal cost of restoring such a universal meals program is well-served and will also be at least partially offset by the reduced administrative costs that school districts must undertake in the current system.

No child should ever go home hungry or suffer academically because of a lack of nutrition, and passing SB557 is a massive step forward in making that a reality. I encourage members of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee to support this bill.

Respectfully submitted,
Parim Shah