



BILL: Senate Bill 557
TITLE: Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion
HEARING DATE: February 22, 2023 (Budget and Taxation Committee)
POSITION: FAVORABLE
COMMITTEES: Budget and Taxation
Education, Energy, and Environment
CONTACT: Ms. Patricia Ursprung, Deputy Legal Counsel (301-766-2946)

The Washington County Board of Education (WCBOE) supports House Bill 628, which would provide free breakfast and lunch for all students attending public schools in Maryland that participate in the federal free and reduced-price meals programs, regardless of the family's eligibility for the programs. This bill will benefit families by eliminating the financial burden of purchasing school meals for their children, especially for those families whose income only slightly exceeds the eligibility requirements for the federal programs, or who otherwise qualify but fail to complete the necessary application. It will also benefit schools by eliminating, or greatly reducing, indebtedness attributable to unpaid and outstanding school meals accounts that, in many cases, is never collected.

In his State of the State, Governor Moore announced his administration's goal to end childhood poverty, and to do it now. This bill is aligned with that goal by eliminating costs associated with school meals for families attending Maryland schools. Currently, school breakfast in Washington County costs \$1.55 and lunch at the elementary level is \$2.35, while secondary students pay \$2.60. Therefore, a family who is ineligible for free or reduced-price meals would pay either \$3.90 or \$4.15 per day for their child to eat school-provided breakfast and lunch. If that student attends school for all 180 school days, the total annual cost is \$702 or \$747, depending on the grade level.

A family of three is eligible for reduced price meals if they have an annual gross income of no more than \$42,606. This means a family with a monthly income, before taxes, of approximately \$3,552 would not be eligible for reduced-priced meals and could spend \$83 per month on school meals if their child is at the secondary level, and \$78 for an elementary student. These costs are in addition to other monthly expenses facing the family, such as increasing food costs at home, housing expenses, utilities, etc. While \$78 may not seem like much, it is a burden for many of our families, meaning students either go hungry or the family goes into arrears with the school system, as we never deny a child food.

For those families who do go into arrears, it is difficult for the school to collect on the outstanding indebtedness. Currently, families are indebted to WCBOE in excess of \$23,000 for school meals. That total will certainly continue to grow, but it is expected that, at most, only a small portion of that indebtedness will be collected. This bill benefits schools by eliminating the need to act as a collection agency and devote staff time and resources to attempting to collect outstanding balances from families. In the most extreme cases, it prevents the school system from being in the unenviable position of deciding if they should send accounts to a collection agency, which would be harmful for the family and the school's relationship with them. It also ensures that none of the funds in an already tight budget will need to be diverted to cover outstanding food debts. The amount of uncollected debt must be supported entirely by local educational funds because federal law does not allow the school meals enterprise funds to absorb bad debts as a cost.

Given the benefit this will have for all families attending Washington County Public Schools, especially those experiencing financial struggles, WCBOE respectfully requests a favorable report on House Bill 628.
Thank you.

cc: Washington County Board of Education Members
Washington County Delegation to the Maryland General Assembly
Dr. David T. Sovine, Superintendent
Dr. Jennifer Webster, Associate Superintendent for Administration and Leadership
Dr. Gary Willow, Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction
Mr. Jeffrey Proulx, Chief Operating Officer
Ms. Ilissa Ramm, Chief Legal Counsel
Mr. Michael Embly, Supervisor of Food and Nutrition Services
Mr. John Woolums, Director of Governmental Relations, Maryland Association of Boards of Education
Ms. Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director, Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland