

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB557

Senate Budget & Taxation Committee

February 22, 2023

I am Fania Yangarber, Executive Director of Healthy School Food Maryland®. I am testifying on behalf of the over 6,000 parents whom we represent across Maryland, and I am also testifying on behalf of Chelsi Lewis, Chair of the Food & Nutrition Subcommittee of the Montgomery County Council of Parent Teacher Associations (MCCPTA).

We strongly support **SB557**, 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.

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

The expansion of free school meals to all students is critical in addressing the lack of access to healthy food in schools that students in elementary through high schools have been dealing with for many years. Providing free

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/>.

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/>.

school meals to all students in a school also helps to reduce stigma around free and reduced meals.

Marylanders need this investment.

In our own county, nearly forty percent of our student population qualifies for Free and Reduced Meals. During the first 18 months of the pandemic, **Healthy School Food Maryland®** and **MCCPTA** worked with the Montgomery County Food Security Task Force, coordinated by the Montgomery County Food Council and the Department of Health and Human Services, and with Montgomery County Public Schools to deliver over 100,000 pounds of fresh produce and 70,000 school meals directly to families. Our volunteers interacted directly with these communities, and it was clear that while the access that we were expanding during the most critical months of the pandemic was crucial, the need in the communities was high and didn't end when HFSM's and MCCPTA's intervention did. Consistent access to school meals is the minimum requirement to improve outcomes for underserved communities. **SB557** addresses access, and we believe this is a good beginning to ensuring nutrition security for all of Maryland's school children.

Prior to the pandemic, too many Maryland children were left out of the benefits of access to nutritious food due to the current program structure. 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. 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, especially given the cost of living in many communities. In Montgomery County, where the area median income in 2020 was \$110,012, a significant number of students would not qualify for free school meals under the current system yet may be facing food insecurity due to the high cost of living and the significant economic and social challenges families face in the aftermath of the pandemic. A 2017 Montgomery County Food Council report revealed that based on the cost of living in Montgomery County, it costs at least \$91,252 for a four-person family to afford the basic necessities, much higher than the \$24,860 Federal Poverty level.¹¹

Maryland has made strides in supporting equitable access to school meals by reimbursing additional funds for reduced price meals. Several states—including California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Maine, and Vermont—have taken more significant steps to ensure that access to school meals is something that families can count on, and Maryland should do the same. Providing school meals at no cost to all students and families in the state is a smart and effective investment in Maryland communities. Maryland would be supporting equity in the classroom and making sure every child has the nutrition they need to excel. These meals are just as important to students' academic success as textbooks or transportation and should be treated as a critical component to education. When students are distracted by hunger because they were unable to participate in school breakfast or lunch, they miss out on the chance to learn and benefit from the important opportunities offered by Maryland's education system.

We strongly urge a favorable report on SB557 to support students, families, schools, and entire communities throughout Maryland.

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>.

¹¹ A Food Secure Montgomery County: A 5-Year Strategic Plan (2017). Available at: https://assets.jhsph.edu/clf/mod_clfResource/doc/MoCo_Food-Security-Plan_2017_small.pdf