

# Ensuring That School Children are Provided Healthy Breakfast and Lunch Meals is Both Morally and Economically Sound Public Policy

*Position Statement Supporting Senate Bill 557*

**Given before the Senate Budget and Taxation and Education, Energy, and the Environment Committees**

In an unparalleled time of uncertainty for families across our state, ensuring that the most vulnerable persons in our population, children, have their basic nutritional needs met is both morally and economically efficient for all Marylanders. Expanding access to breakfast and lunch meals for students with state funds that would cover those cost for ALL students, in schools that participate in the National School Lunch or School Breakfast program, is good public policy. It would also help to provide some economic security for low-income Maryland families already struggling to put food on the table. For these reasons, **the Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports Senate Bill 557.**

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 high 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<sup>i ii iii</sup>;
- improved attendance, which is positively linked to academic achievement<sup>iv v</sup>;
- reduced food insecurity, which is linked to poor academic outcomes<sup>vi</sup>;
- improved nutrition, such as increased consumption of fruit, vegetables, and milk<sup>vii</sup>;
- improved overall health and long-term health outcomes, as well as reduction in obesity rates, anxiety, and depression<sup>viii ix</sup>.

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 has historically left 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 year. 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 just as important to students' academic success as textbooks or transportation and should be treated as a critical component of 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.

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, **the Maryland Center on Economic Policy respectfully requests that the House Ways and Means give a favorable report to Senate Bill 557.** We thank you for your consideration.

---

## Equity Impact Analysis: Senate Bill 557

### *Bill summary*

Senate Bill 557 would 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 and provides the reimbursement rate at which the State will pay county boards and participating nonpublic schools for the meals offered to students.

### *Background*

At the height of the pandemic, during the 2020 and 2021 school years, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) provided waivers to schools across the country including Maryland, 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 has historically left too many children out by allowing them to fall through the cracks.

### *Equity Implications*

Data shows that school meals play an effective role in alleviating poverty and food insecurity, supporting good nutrition, boosting learning, and improving health outcomes. However, nearly 60 percent of children just above the cutoff for free school meals are children of color<sup>x</sup>. Healthy School Meals for All can serve as a critical tool to fight to achieve racial equity, improving educational and health outcomes for students, particularly Black and Latinx students, by allowing schools to offer breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost. Black and Latinx children across the U.S. have historically experienced food insecurity at a disproportionately high rate, a trend that continues today. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [found](#) that in 2019–2020, 18.8 percent of Black children and 15.7 percent of Latinx children lived in food-insecure households, compared to 6.5 percent of white children<sup>xi</sup>. Although not measured by the CDC, research indicates that food insecurity among [Indigenous](#) people and certain [Asian American and Pacific Islander](#) ethnic subgroups is also significantly higher than average.

## Impact

Senate Bill 577 would likely **improve racial and economic equity** in Maryland.

---

<sup>i</sup> 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/>.

<sup>ii</sup> 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/>.

<sup>iii</sup> 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>.

<sup>iv</sup> Murphy, J. M. (2007). Breakfast and learning: an updated review. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228638584\\_Breakfast\\_and\\_Learning\\_An\\_Updated\\_Review](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228638584_Breakfast_and_Learning_An_Updated_Review).

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

<sup>vi</sup> 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/>.

<sup>vii</sup> 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/>.

<sup>viii</sup> 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>.

<sup>ix</sup> 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/>.

<sup>x</sup> Children's Defense Fund. Infographic: Universal School Meals are Essential for Advancing Racial Equity. <https://www.childrensdefense.org/reports/2021/universal-school-meals-infographic/>

<sup>xi</sup> Heidi Ullmann, Ph.D., Julie D. Weeks, Ph.D., and Jennifer H. Madans, Ph.D. Children Living in Households That Experienced Food Insecurity: United States, 2019–2020. National Center for Health Statistics Center for Disease Control and Prevention <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db432.pdf>