

February 21, 2023

2023 Session Support Testimony

SB557- Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs, Universal Expansion

COMMITTEE: Budget and Taxation  
POSITION: Testimony of Support for SB557  
BILL ANALYSIS: Providing Universal School Meals to All Maryland Students  
SIGNED: Maryland Food System Resiliency Council (FRSC)

Honorable Chair Guzzone Vice-Chair Rosapepe, and Members of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee

My name is Michael J. Wilson. I am the Chair of the Communications and Coordination Committee of the Maryland Food System Resiliency Council (FSRC). These comments are submitted on behalf of the Council, and do not necessarily represent the views the State of Maryland. The FSRC was established by the Maryland General Assembly in the 2021 legislative session to bring together 33 appointed council members from across the state, all with different points of entry and expertise, to work toward a common goal of a more resilient food system and to address the food insecurity crisis due to COVID-19.

The FSRC strongly supports House Bill 628 – Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion, which would require that all schools across the state of Maryland participating in the federal meal programs provide free breakfast and lunch to all students. Members of the FSRC recognize that during the school year, programs like the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program serve as the first line of defense against food insecurity, helping to shield children from going through the day hungry in the classroom and unable to concentrate.

A large body of evidence demonstrates that school meals reduce childhood hunger, decrease childhood overweight and obesity, improve child nutrition and wellness, enhance child development and school readiness, and support learning, attendance, and behavior.<sup>1</sup> Providing universal school meals (through the federal community eligibility provision, or CEP) has helped

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<sup>1</sup> Food Research and Action Center. School Meals are Essential for Student Health and Learning. May 2021. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning.pdf>

to reduce food insecurity<sup>2</sup> and improve student nutrition, behavior, and academic performance<sup>3</sup> at participating schools. Investing in these programs so that all children in the state of Maryland, regardless of income, can access healthy meals year-round would help ensure that every child is ready to learn and thrive.

During the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, COVID-19 pandemic-related waivers issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture allowed school meals to be served at no cost in Maryland and across the nation, no matter a family's income level. These waivers helped mitigate the alarming spikes in food insecurity caused by COVID-19 and provided a much-needed lifeline to struggling families and children.

However, despite the benefits of providing meals to all students at no cost, these pandemic-era provisions expired at the end of the 21-22 school year, meaning a return to the traditional tiered payment system starting this school year. The tiered payment system results in many students who need a nutritious breakfast and lunch at school failing to qualify for free or reduced-price meals. For example, a family of four living on just \$50,000 per year is ineligible for this program. Additionally, there are stigma issues inherent in a tiered payment system, and students bear the brunt of the unpaid school meal debt facing families and schools.

HB 628 aims to permanently remove these barriers in all Maryland schools participating in the federal meal programs. Adding state funding dedicated to providing all children, regardless of income, with access to healthy meals will help ensure that every child is ready to learn and thrive.

As such, we respectfully urge a favorable report on HB 628. Thank you for your consideration.

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<sup>2</sup> Gross S, et al. Household Food Security Status of Families with Children Attending Schools that Participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and Those with Children Attending Schools that are CEP-Eligible, but Not Participating. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*. 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2019.1679318>

<sup>3</sup> Hecht A, et al. Impact of The Community Eligibility Provision of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act on Student Nutrition, Behavior, and Academic Outcomes: 2011–2019. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305743>