



Welfare Advocates

Founded 1979

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Senate Bill 557

Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Program – Universal Expansion

Senate Budget and Taxation Committee & Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee

February 22, 2022

Support

Welfare Advocates is a statewide coalition of social service organizations, advocacy groups, faith communities, and community members, whose mission it is to educate about and advocate for an adequate safety net and public policies that support families moving towards economic stability.

Welfare Advocates strongly supports SB 557, which expands 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 dramatically changed our programs, our economy and our communities. Before the pandemic, one in ten Marylanders lived at or below the Federal Poverty Line. When the pandemic began, safety-net program caseloads skyrocketed as more individuals and families in Maryland tumbled into economic insecurity. COVID-19 has laid to bare longstanding inequities in our systems and put a spotlight on the entrenched gaps and barriers that have long existed in our programs and policies to address and end poverty, especially for Black and Brown communities that have disproportionately borne the brunt of the pandemic due to systemic racism and historic disinvestment. It takes the longest for those with the lowest incomes to recover from economic crises, but alarmingly many of the extra supports that have kept families afloat – like universal free school meals - have ended.

The National School Breakfast and Lunch Programs are a critical part of the social safety-net, but many struggling families are unable to qualify for the program now that tiered income requirements are back in place. Especially with rising costs of inflation, there are many Maryland families who struggle financially to meet their most basic needs and yet do not qualify for free school meals because their income exceeds the incredibly low income eligibility threshold. Children get upwards of half of their daily calories from school meals, and as countless families are falling through the cracks of income eligibility, now is a critical time for the state to invest in a universal school meals program.¹ When students are distracted by hunger because their families are unable to afford school breakfast or lunch, they miss out on the chance to learn and benefit from the important opportunities offered by Maryland's education system.

Providing free meals to all students is an essential investment in the health, wellbeing, and academic success of Maryland's children. Offering school meals at no cost to all students supports equity in the classroom by making sure every child has the nutrition they need in order to excel. School meals are an essential component to education, and are linked to reduced food insecurity, improved academic achievement, improved school attendance, and improved overall health.² SB 557 is a smart investment for the future of our students, and also the future of our State.

WA appreciates your consideration, and respectfully urges a favorable report on SB 557.

Submitted by Lisa Klingenmaier, Chair of Welfare Advocates

¹ CDC. 2022. School Nutrition. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/nutrition/schoolnutrition.htm>

² 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/>.
