



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 557

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

*Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee*

February 22, 2023

Maryland Hunger Solutions strongly supports SB 557, which aims to provide state funding for schools operating the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program to provide a healthy school breakfast and school lunch to all children at no cost to them or their families.

As a statewide, non-partisan, nonprofit working to end hunger in Maryland, Maryland Hunger Solutions strives to overcome existing barriers to state and federal nutrition assistance programs and create self-sustaining connections between Maryland residents and nutritious foods.

Among these nutrition programs, the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program play the most critical role as the nation's first line of defense against childhood food insecurity.

School meals have been shown to be some of the healthiest meals many children consume on a daily basis, providing students with nutrition they need to learn and thrive during the school day and beyond. [Multiple studies have linked participation in school meals to an incredible number of beneficial outcomes for students](#) including reduced food insecurity, decreased rates of obesity, and improved overall nutrition and wellness. Beyond reducing hunger, this research also links participation in school meals to positive educational outcomes such as enhanced child development and school readiness, and improved academic achievement, attendance, and classroom behavior.

During the past two school years, federally funded free school meals served as a critical resource to keep children fed, alleviate child hunger, advance racial equity, and promote child well-being during a time of extreme uncertainty. The role that school meals played during the pandemic and school closures highlights the importance of this nutritional safety net to the health of Maryland communities.

The loss of federal pandemic-related funding for free school meals this year has been devastating for Maryland students and families, especially at a time when historically high inflation and grocery prices are driving the need for these programs higher than ever. Across the state, just over half of Maryland students, or around 473,000 children, have lost access to this benefit and are now required to pay for their school meals.

Maryland has made great strides in the past that have helped to mitigate the impact of this loss, such as covering the reduced-price copay for low-income families, and expanding the number of students directly certified for free meals through Medicaid data matching. However, families and school systems are still facing immense challenges with the return to a tiered payment system.

While the free and reduced-price meal program exists to ensure low-income children receive the nutritional support they need, many families who struggle to meet their most basic needs do not apply or even qualify for this program.



Too many children who qualify for free school meals fall through the cracks due to stigma and administrative barriers. When school meals are perceived as a resource only for children from low-income households, many students decline to participate, despite their hunger. Additional obstacles such as language barriers and misinformation about the program also keep many eligible families from submitting school meal applications.

Additionally, the extremely low eligibility threshold excludes many more families. For example, a family of four living off of just \$52,000 a year is unable to qualify for any assistance. With Maryland's already high cost of living and current inflation rates, more families than ever are struggling to make ends meet but are still unable to qualify for assistance.

Students and families are not the only ones facing these challenges. Because so many families struggle to pay for school meals, **school systems are reporting unprecedented increases in school meal debt this school year**, forcing them to spend valuable time and resources trying to locate additional funds to cover their operating costs, which are often redirected from general funds that would have otherwise supported educational programming and other important wraparound services.

The solution to these challenges is clear. Providing healthy school meals to all students at no cost was a proven success during the pandemic and in the 357 Maryland schools using the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) to continue providing school meals for free to all students, including every school in Baltimore City, Somerset County, Dorchester County, and Wicomico County.

CEP provides federal reimbursement for schools that have high poverty rates that are directly certified from other federal programs. Research provided by Dr. Susan Gross of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health on the implementation of the CEP in Maryland clearly shows that this universal meals program not only helps students and schools, but helps to reduce food insecurity in the community.

Offering free school meals to all students results in more children eating breakfast and lunch at school, allowing families to stretch their food budgets at home, and removing the burden of school meal debt from families and school systems. By passing and enacting SB 557, Maryland will be making an important step in advancing equity, supporting students' education and health, and improving school nutrition operations.

Our national partner organization, the Food Research and Action Center, has been working with schools and states all across the nation as they work to implement healthy school meal programs. From Maine to California, from Colorado to Minnesota. Maryland is among other states working to make investments in the health and nutrition of our children.

Hungry children can't wait. Now is the time for our state to act on this opportunity to make the smart investment in our children and Maryland's future.

Thank you for your consideration. Maryland Hunger Solutions respectfully urges a favorable report on SB 557.