

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 628/SB 557
**Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal
Expansion**
House Ways and Means Committee/Senate Budget & Taxation Committee
February 20, 2023

Holy Cross Health strongly supports HB 628/SB 557, which seeks to expand universal breakfast and lunch programs in primary and secondary schools participating in the National School Lunch or School Breakfast Program throughout the state.

As a healthcare provider, we know that access to healthy and nutritious meals is critical to the health and well-being of children. Unfortunately, food insecurity is a serious issue across the state and was identified as a priority in our most recent community health needs assessment. By expanding universal breakfast and lunch programs, we can help to ensure that all children in Maryland have access to healthy meals. This will improve not only their physical health but also their academic performance, as well-nourished children are better able to concentrate and learn.

Moreover, we know that food insecurity is a social determinant of health that can contribute to various health issues, including chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension. By addressing this issue through expanded school meal programs, we can help prevent these health problems and promote better health outcomes for Maryland's children.

Although Maryland has one of the highest household incomes in the United States, many Marylanders need this investment. For example, a family of four must have an annual income of around \$36,000 or less for free meals and around \$52,000 or less to qualify for reduced-price meals. However, the average self-sufficiency standard in Maryland for the same size family averages more than \$72,800. Too many Maryland families 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 support equity in the classroom and ensure every child has the nutrition they need to excel. These meals are important to students' academic success, just as textbooks or transportation are, and should be treated as a critical component of education. When students are distracted by hunger because they cannot 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. Hungry kids can't learn.

Ensuring every child in the state has access to a nutritious school breakfast and lunch daily is a smart and effective investment in Maryland's communities and future. As a long-standing anchor institution, Holy Cross Health is committed to the health and well-being of our community. As such, we thank you for your consideration and urge a favorable report on HB 628/SB 557.