

Testimony for Consideration for Md House Bill 628

Good afternoon. My name is Hillary Crystal and I am a retired registered nurse, lifetime Maryland resident, graduate of Baltimore City public schools and the University of Maryland School of Nursing. After retiring from full time nursing in 2020, I became a volunteer with the student support network of Baltimore County. I could not bear the thought that some in our own community were struggling to put food on the table, so I began working with the weekly pandemic food distributions at OMHS. I saw the level of food insecurity in my own community, as cars lined up hours prior to our start time to get food. Our neighbors were sometimes close to tears with gratitude as they received food. We had 1 volunteer who was a senior at the school who volunteered most weeks with us. We came to understand that he usually came because his family needed the food and he felt better about taking it if he helped out. Fast forward to September 2022, when many of these free food distributions are gone. At a meeting with the school assistant principal, ESOL coordinator, and social worker, we were told that a number of students at OMHS were not eating lunch. Some were sharing lunch with a friend, some not eating at all. Why? Many parents were not aware that the pandemic free school lunch program had ended, and had not applied for free lunch. Some lacked access to the internet to complete the paperwork, some had a language barrier, some made too much money to qualify, but not enough to sustain their family in Baltimore county. Some kids were (and are) too embarrassed to take advantage of the free lunch program. Kids were (and are) not eating. The SSN stepped in with emergency lunches for students for several weeks, however this situation could have been averted. We need to remove the stigma and embarrassment these students experience when requesting and receiving free lunch. We need to provide ALL students with free breakfast and lunch.

The entire community benefits when our students are healthy, productive, and happy. They are certainly more likely to become healthy, productive and happy adults and assets to our community. Kids should not have to worry about whether they will eat today or not. This is a problem you have the responsibility and power to solve. Let's not leave anyone behind, let's lift them up. We all know, it's the right thing to do.