

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 628

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

House Ways and Means Committee

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My name is Dr. Susan Gross. I am a nutritionist and an associate scientist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and I strongly support House Bill 628-Primary and Secondary Education-Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion, which aims to provide equitable access to Healthy School Meals For All and will ensure no student goes hungry during the school day. Additionally, this bill will support school systems, students, and their families as they recover from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by covering the cost of breakfast and lunch for all Maryland students. Hunger in children is associated with inability to concentrate and aggressive behavior¹; and by feeding our students learning can occur without distraction. The provision of healthy meals for all students will also reduce the stigma associated with not having money to pay for meals as no one will be singled out.

During 2020 and 2021, the American Rescue Plan provided flexibility for all schools to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students. Maryland rose to this challenge, seamlessly provided these meals to all its students, and strengthened our safety net for all families. Unfortunately, this flexibility expired in the Fall of 2022, and once again, students and families in Maryland faced uncertainty about breakfast and lunch on school days.

One strategy to bolster our child nutrition safety net in the past was to expand access to the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). CEP allows high-poverty schools participating in US Department of Agriculture meal programs to offer universal free breakfast and lunch. Authorized as part of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, CEP became available to eligible schools nationwide in 2014. This bill HB 628- Healthy School Meals for All build on the success of CEP by providing universal free breakfast and lunch in all schools across Maryland.

Since 2015, I have been evaluating the impact of CEP on Maryland schools. My research has included speaking with school administrators, parents, and students in Maryland about issues related to food insecurity. One of the consistent findings of our research was that families of students who could not pay for the school meals and did not qualify for free meals often had trouble coming up with the money for school provided meals on a regular basis.

Maryland students in non-CEP districts complained of experiencing shaming in the cafeteria when they could not afford to pay for meals at school. Additionally, children and adolescents fear the stigma of being identified by their peers as poor or needy, which often leads to skipping meals. Skipping meals has been associated with poor academic performance and increased risk of behavioral issues.²

After the adoption of CEP by Baltimore City Public Schools, students in participating schools were nearly three times less likely to be food insecure compared to students attending a CEP eligible, but nonparticipating school, even after adjusting for race/ethnicity and education level of the parent/caregiver.³ Other research has shown that schools that provide universal free meals experience positive impacts on student nutrition, behavior, and academic performance.⁴

With Healthy School Meals For All, students will have the security of knowing that at least two meals per day are available to them each school day, and it will provide the security and stability they need to learn and grow.

Maryland has the opportunity to reduce food insecurity, meal debt shaming and stigmatization of Maryland students and expand the availability of healthy school meals through HB 628.

As such, I urge a favorable report on HB 628 in order to support students, families, schools, and entire communities as we move beyond the pandemic.

The opinions expressed herein are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Johns Hopkins University.

Thank you for the opportunity to express my thoughts.

¹ Kleinman RE, et al. Pediatrics. 1998. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.101.1.e3>

² Müller K, et al. Eur J Clin Nutr. 2013 Feb;67(2):185-9.

³ Gross S, et al. J Hunger Envir Nutr Oct 2019 <https://doi.org/10.1080/19.320248.2019.1679318>

⁴ Hecht A, et al. American journal of public health 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305743>