

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 628

Healthy School Meals for All

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

House Ways and Means Committee

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My name is Kaitlyn Harper, and I am a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. I strongly support House Bill 628, which aims to provide equitable access to nutritious school meals for all K-12 students. This bill will help the most vulnerable children and families in Maryland, including those who have been historically oppressed. Additionally, this bill will ease administrative burden on school systems, improving the well-being of school staff and allowing them to focus on what matters most—our children.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Maryland schools worked tirelessly to ensure that all children would have access to meals, even when their families couldn't afford it. Schools were able to provide free meals to students through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and in the summer months alone, over 9.5 million meals were served in 2020, a significant increase from the 3 million meals served in 2019¹. Unfortunately, free meals for all students will not be extended past this current school year.

My research focuses on food security among adolescents living in Baltimore City. Baltimore City participates in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which provides school meals at no cost to all students. Free school meals are particularly important for adolescents, who face increased stigma compared to younger students when acquiring food at school. Additionally, adolescents are often in charge of their own food acquisition, and they rely on school meals when there is no food at home. In interviews with adolescents experiencing food insecurity, one boy noted:

*"Sometimes, my grandmother wouldn't feel like cooking. At that point, there wasn't any food in the house so I would eat twice at school. I would double up on the school lunches."*²

Not all districts in Maryland participate in CEP, and hunger gaps exist across the state. Indeed, 25% of middle school students and 28% of high school students experience food insecurity in Maryland³.

With Universal Meals, students will have at least two meals guaranteed to them each school day, which will provide the security and stability they need to learn and grow. Maryland can be among the first states to adopt this policy that will reduce food insecurity and stigmatization of Maryland students.

As such, I urge a favorable report on HB 628 to support students, families, schools, and entire communities through the pandemic and beyond.

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 Harper K, Everett J, Borman R, Gross J, Lu SV, Wilson MJ, Gross SM. Summer Food Service Program Meal Participation in Maryland Increased during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*. 2022 Jul 18:1-2.

² Harper K, Lu SV, Caulfield LE, Mmari K, Gross SM. Food acquisition and the nature of food agency among adolescents with food security and those with food insecurity. *Under Review. Appetite*.

³ No Kid Hungry Maryland. Food insecurity among middle and high school students in Maryland. <https://state.nokidhungry.org/maryland/2020/08/25/new-report-food-insecurity-among-middle-and-high-school-students-in-maryland-reveals-a-disturbing-reality-for-1-in-4-secondary-school-students/>