



February 22, 2023

**2023 SESSION SUPPORT TESTIMONY  
HBo628: Universal School Meals**

**BILL:** HBo628: Primary and Secondary Education - Breakfast and Lunch Programs  
- Universal Expansion

**COMMITTEE:** Ways and Means

**POSITION:** Testimony in Support of House Bill 0628

**BILL ANALYSIS:** Altering the standards of the State Free Feeding Program, beginning in FY25, to require that if a school participates in the federal School Breakfast Program or the National School Lunch Program, then each student in the school must be offered a meal at no cost to the student; providing for the reimbursement rate at which the State shall pay county boards and participating nonpublic schools for the meals offered to students.

Dear Chair Atterbeary and members of the House Ways and Means Committee:

The Montgomery County Food Council (MCFC) urges you to **SUPPORT** this bill to expand the Federal School Breakfast and Lunch program to provide free meals to Maryland students beginning in fiscal year 2025.

This legislation is an essential investment for the health and academic success of Maryland students. Access to nutritious food at school allows students to be better focused while in class and sets them up for success throughout the school day. By providing meals to all students that are aligned with USDA guidelines, this bill removes stigma from participating in the school meal program and ensures that students are getting whole meals that are nutritious. School systems provide desks, textbooks, and transportation for students; school meals should be considered another essential part of the educational experience in our state. Other states such as Colorado, Massachusetts, Maine, and California have also recently begun providing universal school meals to reduce barriers like hunger to a successful education. For many students, school may be their most reliable source of food and having access to meals will be a huge relief to many families.

During the 2021-22 school year, over 95,000 Montgomery County students received their lunch through school and more than 50% of those were free and reduced-priced meals. Due to the high cost of living in Montgomery County, there are many students who face food insecurity but are ineligible for free and reduced-price meals due to their household income being above 185% of the



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federal poverty level. This gap can cause some students to have insufficient food during the day.

Where schools provide food to students without sufficient funds to cover the cost, the schools then face unrecoverable debt. Since 2018, Montgomery County has settled \$235,579 worth of student debt from school lunches<sup>1</sup>. This legislation would also lessen the burden on the school system to keep track of debts, and remove the potentially humiliating interactions for students who are unable to afford school meals.

We strongly support this bill to establish universal school meals at participating public and nonpublic schools and create a system to support students enrolled in schools that are not eligible. With students spending the majority of the day at school, it is vital to ensure that all students are able to access nutritious meals that do not create an additional financial burden on students' families or school systems. To best ensure the future success of all Montgomery County students, and students in the state of Maryland as a whole, it is vital to remove barriers to education and food access. **For these reasons, the Montgomery County Food Council supports HB0628 and urges a FAVORABLE REPORT for this bill.**

*The Montgomery County Food Council is a nonprofit organization that serves as the primary connection point for businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, and residents around food system issues in our County. We bring together over 2,000 local and regional partners in community-wide education, advocacy, and capacity building initiatives. Our work cultivates a more resilient, sustainable, and equitable local food system by enhancing food access for the over 100,000 at risk for hunger, expanding food education opportunities for all residents, supporting our County's farms and food and beverage businesses, and addressing the impact of local food production, distribution, consumption and recycling on our natural resources*

**For more information, please contact Massa Cressall, Interim Executive Director, at the email and phone number below.**

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<sup>1</sup> DCist, 2022 "Montgomery County School Lunch Debt Policy"  
<https://dcist.com/story/22/05/10/md-montgomery-county-school-lunch-debt-policy/>

