



MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND
WOMEN'S DEMOCRATIC CLUB

P.O. Box 34047, Bethesda, MD 20827

www.womensdemocraticclub.org

**House Bill 696 - Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs –
Universal Expansion
Ways and Means Committee, February 14, 2024
SUPPORT**

Thank you for this opportunity to submit written testimony concerning an important priority of the **Montgomery County Women's Democratic Club (WDC)** for the 2024 legislative session. WDC is one of the largest and most active Democratic Clubs in our County with hundreds of politically active members, including many elected officials.

WDC strongly supports HB 696, which aims to expand access to school meals by providing state funds to cover the cost of school breakfast and school lunch for all students in schools participating in the National School Lunch or School Breakfast Program.

School meals play an important role in supporting academic success, reducing childhood hunger, supporting good nutrition, and ensuring that students are well-nourished and ready to get the most out of the school day. Extensive research has linked participation in school meals to several benefits:

- improved academic achievement, standardized test scores, and cognitive function^{1 2 3};
- improved attendance, which is positively linked to academic achievement^{4 5};
- reduced food insecurity, which is linked to poor academic outcomes⁶;
- improved nutrition, such as increased consumption of fruit, vegetables, and milk⁷;
- improved overall health and long-term health outcomes, as well as reduction in obesity rates, anxiety, and depression^{8 9}.

¹ Vaisman, N., Voet, H., Akivis, A., & Vakil, E., (1996). Effects of Breakfast Timing on Cognitive Functions of Elementary School Students. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/8859144/>.

² Ptomey, L. T., Steger, F. L., Schubert, M. M., Lee, J., Willis, E. A., Sullivan, D. K., Szabo-Reed, A. N., Washburn, R. A., & Donnelly, J. E. (2016). Breakfast intake and composition is associated with superior academic achievement in elementary schoolchildren. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26697955/>.

³ Frisvold, D. E. (2015). Nutrition and cognitive achievement: an evaluation of the School Breakfast Program. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047272714002497>.

⁴ Murphy, J. M. (2007). Breakfast and learning: an updated review. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228638584_Breakfast_and_Learning_An_Updated_Review.

⁵ Basch, C. E. (2011). Breakfast and the achievement gap among urban minority youth. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21923876/>.

⁶ Huang, J., & Barnidge, E. (2016). Low-income children's participation in the National School Lunch Program and household food insufficiency. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26722983/>.

⁷ Clark, M. A., & Fox, M. K. (2009). Nutritional quality of the diets of U.S. public school children and the role of the school meal programs. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19166672/>.

⁸ Gundersen, C., Kreider, B., & Pepper, J. (2012). The impact of the National School Lunch Program on child health: a nonparametric bounds analysis. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0304407611001205>.

⁹ Kleinman, R. E., Hall, S., Green, H., Korzec-Ramirez, D., Patton, K., Pagano, M. E., & Murphy, J. M. (2002). Diet, breakfast, and academic performance in children. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12428078/>.



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As vital as these school nutrition programs are, too many children miss out on school meals because of the current structure. Many struggling families do not meet the eligibility criteria for no-cost meals, which for the 2023-2024 school year requires a family of four to earn less than \$55,500 annually.¹⁰ With the cost of living on the rise, there are too many Maryland families who struggle financially to meet their most basic needs and yet do not qualify because their income exceeds this incredibly low eligibility threshold.

Now is the time for Maryland to make this critical investment in our children and communities. Schools were able to offer school meals at no cost beginning in the spring of 2020 through the 2021-2022 school year during the height of the pandemic with federal relief funding. This trial run showed how beneficial offering meals at no cost to all students is for children, families, and schools, but now that federal funding has run dry, and Maryland needs to fill the gap.

Providing school meals at no cost to all students, would support equity in the classroom by making sure every child has the nutrition they need to excel. These meals are just as important to students' academic success as textbooks or transportation and should be treated as a critical component to education. When students are distracted by hunger because they were unable to participate in school breakfast or lunch, they miss out on the chance to learn and benefit from the important opportunities offered by Maryland's education system. Additionally, it would ease the pressure on household food budgets and reduce administrative work for school staff by eliminating school meal debt and ending the financial burden that debt creates for families and school districts.

Hungry kids can't wait. It's time for Maryland to make Healthy School Meals for All a priority and join the growing list of states¹¹ that have guaranteed all students have access to the healthy meals they need to grow and thrive.

We ask for your support for HB 696 and strongly urge a favorable Committee report.

Tazeen Ahmad
WDC President

Laura Stewart
WDC Children & Youth
Subcommittee

Melissa Bender
Co-Chair, WDC
Advocacy

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. (2022). Child Nutrition Programs: Income Eligibility Guidelines. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/fr-021622>.

¹¹ Food Research and Action Center. (2023). "States Show Us What Is Possible With Healthy School Meals for All Policies." <https://frac.org/blog/free-healthy-school-meals-for-all-policies#:~:text=California%2C%20Maine%2C%20Colorado%2C%20Minnesota,School%20Meals%20for%20All%20policies>.