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Testimony on House Bill 696
**Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast
and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion**
House Ways and Means Committee

Position: Favorable

Maryland Nonprofits is a statewide association of more than 1800 nonprofit organizations and institutions. We urge you to support House Bill 696 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.

Extensive research has linked participation in school meals to a number of benefits, including improved academic achievement, better test scores, and improved cognitive function standardized test scores, and cognitive function; improved attendance; improved nutrition and reduced food insecurity.

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. 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.

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 in order 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.

Please make Healthy School Meals for All a priority and join the growing list of states that have guaranteed all students have access to the healthy meals they need to grow and thrive.

We ask that you give House Bill 696 a FAVORABLE report.



