



NAACP

Maryland
STATE CONFERENCE

HB 696 – Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion
Ways and Means Committee
Position: Favorable

February 14, 2024

The Honorable Delegate Atterbeary, Chair
House Office Building
6 Bladen St.
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Honorable Delegate Vanessa Atterbeary, Delegate Jheanelle Wilkins and Members of the Committee:

I am writing on behalf of the Maryland State Conference of the NAACP. We support House Bill 696, Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion, which is currently before the Ways and Means Committee. We ask that all members of the committee support this very important legislation that would provide equitable access to healthy school meals to all kids, making sure no student goes hungry during the school day. This legislation introduced by Delegates Carr, Allen, et al. will allow Maryland school aged children access to school meals at no cost, regardless of income.

NIH – National Library of Medicine, National Center for Biotechnology Information reports that “families who participated in school meal programs pre- and early- pandemic had an 80 % reduction in food insecurity risk”. They further state “The school environment plays an important role in children's diets and overall health, and policies for universal free school meals have the potential to contribute to positive child health outcomes”. The data shows that school meals provide many benefits, such as:

- Improved academic achievement, standardized test scores, and cognitive function,
- improved attendance, which is positively linked to academic achievement,
- reduced food insecurity, which is linked to poor academic outcomes,
- improve nutrition, such as increased consumption of fruit, vegetables, and milk,
- Improved overall health and long-term health outcomes, as well as reduction in obesity rates, anxiety, and depression.

As it stands, many families struggle to meet the eligibility criteria for no-cost meals which requires a family of 4 to earn less than \$55,000 annually. We need to consider that the cost of

living is on the rise, which includes the cost of food and other necessities. Families who do not meet the eligibility criteria may continue to struggle financially despite exceeding the low annual income.

Maryland must invest in children and their communities. The state offered no-cost meals during the pandemic which showed that Maryland can continue this program. NO child should go without a school meal or in debt simply because their family is ineligible for a no-cost meal.

Providing meals at no cost to students will have a great impact on families and communities of color which is why this is an important topic for the NAACP. This will ease the pressure on household food budgets and reduce administrative work for school staff by eliminating school meal debt and ending the financial burden it creates for families and schools.

For these reasons, we support HB 696 and strongly urge a favorable report.

In Service,

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