



# Expanding Access to No-Cost School Meals Will Boost Health and Learning For Maryland Students

## Position Statement Supporting House Bill 696

*Given before the House Ways and Means Committee*

In times of uncertainty and increase economic anxiety in Maryland households reducing the financial strain on low-income families would be a significant relief. Requiring the cost of providing school lunch to be covered by federal reimbursement and state funding would improve health and education for Maryland children. **For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports HB 696.**

School meal programs are a critical resource that provide children with the nutrition they need to thrive academically, physically, and emotionally in both the short and long term. However, the labeling of children and families who benefit from such programs creates social barriers. Maryland can address this by offering school breakfast and lunch to all students, ensuring every child is able to get a healthy meal at school while also eliminating the stigma of these critical programs.

Additionally, HB 696 will help to address the growing food insecurity impacting families. As of October, more than 445,000 Marylanders reported that they didn't always have enough food, highlighting the ongoing need for robust food assistance in the state.<sup>i</sup> Covering the cost of breakfast and lunch for all Maryland students will help to ensure that fewer of our students face fewer struggles in or out of the classroom.

Extensive research has linked participation in school meals to a number of benefits:

- 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;
- Improved 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.

Providing school meals at no cost to all students and families in the state for an additional school year is a smart and effective investment in Maryland communities. **For these reasons, we respectfully ask the Ways and Means Committee to make a favorable report on HB 696.**

## Equity Impact Analysis: House Bill 696

### *Bill summary*

HB 696 alters the standards of the State Free Feeding Program, beginning in fiscal year 2025, to require free school meals for all students. The bill also provides state funding to cover the costs of providing free school meals.

### *Background*

In 2021 and 2022, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has provided waivers to schools across the country, allowing them to serve free school meals to all students. As many Marylanders continue to struggle with high costs for food, rent and other essentials, this ability to serve all students nutritious meals, regardless of income, needs to be extended.

Too many children in need are left out due to the current school meals program structure. To qualify for free school meals, a student's family must be living at or below 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, which translates to annual income of less than \$35,000 for a family of four for the 2021–2022 school year. Similarly, a family of four must have an annual income of around \$49,000 or less to qualify for reduced-price meals. Because the eligibility threshold for these programs are so low, many Maryland families who struggle financially to meet their most basic needs do not qualify.

### *Equity Implications*

Policies in the past have led to a system of unequal opportunities for marginalized groups within Maryland. Although the most obviously racially discriminatory policies have long been overturned or mitigated, the impact of these policies continue to persist in both society and public policy and have led to significant racial and health disparities. Families with children, Marylanders of color, and people with disabilities are all more likely to qualify for and need food assistance programs because of these barriers. Children of color experience much higher rates of economic insecurity and poverty and are more likely to benefit from expanded access to school meals.

### *Impact*

House Bill 696 would likely **improve racial and economic equity** in Maryland.

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<sup>i</sup> Household Pulse Survey, Week 63, Food Sufficiency and Food Insecurity Table 1, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2023/demo/hhp/hhp63.html>