
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF BILL HB 696

Primary and Secondary Education - Breakfast and Lunch Programs - Universal Expansion

Ways and Means Committee

February 14, 2024

Social Work Advocates for Social Change strongly supports HB 696, which allocates state funding to cover the costs of school breakfast and lunch to all primary and secondary students beginning in FY 2026. This bill will help reduce child hunger, remove the stigma surrounding school lunch programs, and lower the cost burden and accrument of school lunch debt.

Providing school breakfast and lunch at no cost will decrease the risk of food insecurity. School breakfast programs decrease the risk of food insecurity and breakfast skipping, especially among low-income children.^{1,2,3} School participation in the National School Lunch Program is associated with around a 14% reduction in the risk of food insecurity.⁴ HB 696 will further reduce the risk of food insecurity by providing access to families who struggle to make ends meet, and yet do not qualify for free or reduced- priced meals because their household income is above the incredibly low eligibility threshold for free or reduced-priced meals.

Offering free breakfast and lunch to children will help reduce the shame and embarrassment experienced by children and families. When children do not have enough money on their accounts, they are asked for cash or required to put items back, leading to unnecessary embarrassment. This is heartbreaking to a parent who never wants their children to feel this way. Parents also feel panic when they receive an email stating that their student's account is less than zero and must be addressed as soon as possible. One member of our organization received this email to find there was a debt of \$0.75. Fortunately, they had the ability to pay. Imagine the feelings invoked when the debt is an amount a family is incapable of paying. HB 696 will be a big step in eliminating these experiences for families.

This bill encourages children to look towards their schools for sustenance and community. One member of our organization worked in a Wellness Center at a Maryland high school where over half of students were receiving free and reduced-priced meals and one fifth were emergent English learners.⁵ Many of the students' parents did not speak English and were not aware of the free and reduced-priced meals program. Many students had trouble feeling connected to the school, and would leave at lunch and not come back. This bill sends a message to children that they are safe and wanted at our schools. Students who ran out of money on their accounts would come to the Wellness Center to ask for a bag of chips. A bag of chips is not a lunch. Our students are facing rising challenges daily. The price of a meal at school should not be a factor in their school day.



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As of September 2023 California, Maine, Colorado, Minnesota, New Mexico, Vermont, Michigan, and Massachusetts have all passed free Healthy School Meals for All policies. It's time for Maryland to join the growing list of states that have guaranteed all students have access to the healthy meals they need to grow and thrive.

Social Work Advocates for Social Change urges a favorable report on HB696.

Respectfully,

Student Advocates for Social Change
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Social Work Advocates for Social Change is a coalition of MSW students at the University of Maryland School of Social Work that seeks to promote equity and justice through public policy, and to engage the communities impacted by public policy in the policymaking process.

¹Bartfeld, J., Kim, M., Ryu, J. H., & Ahn, H. (2009). The School Breakfast Program participation and impacts. Contractor and Cooperator Report, 54. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture.

²Bartfeld, J. S., & Ahn, H. M. (2011). The School Breakfast Program strengthens household food security among low-income households with elementary school children. *Journal of Nutrition*, 141(3), 470–475.

³Bartfeld, J. S., & Ryu, J. H. (2011). The School Breakfast Program and breakfast-skipping among Wisconsin elementary school children. *Social Service Review*, 85(4), 619–634.

⁴Huang, J., & Barnidge, E., (2016). Low-income children's participation in the National School Lunch Program and household food insufficiency. *Social Science & Medicine*, 150, 8–14.

⁵Wheaton High School (2022 – 2023). Montgomery County Public Schools.

<https://ww2.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/regulatoryaccountability/glance/currentyear/schools/04782.pdf>