



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 696

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

House Ways and Means Committee
February 14, 2024

Submitted by Mark Huffman, Co-Chair

Member Agencies:

211 Maryland

Anne Arundel County Food Bank

Baltimore Jewish Council

Behavioral Health System Baltimore

CASH Campaign of Maryland

Energy Advocates

Episcopal Diocese of Maryland

Family League of Baltimore

Fuel Fund of Maryland

Job Opportunities Task Force

Laurel Advocacy & Referral Services,
Inc.

League of Women Voters of Maryland

Loyola University Maryland

Maryland Center on Economic Policy

Maryland Community Action
Partnership

Maryland Family Network

Maryland Food Bank

Maryland Hunger Solutions

Paul's Place

St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore

Welfare Advocates

Marylanders Against Poverty

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Marylanders Against Poverty (MAP) strongly supports HB 696, which aims to provide state funding to offer school breakfast and school lunch at no cost to all Maryland students attending schools that participate in the School Breakfast and National School Lunch Programs.

Studies have long shown that school meals reduce childhood hunger, decrease childhood overweight and obesity, improve child nutrition and wellness, enhance child development and school readiness, and support learning, attendance, and behavior.¹ More recent studies reaffirm that access to nutritious meals in school increases the long-term health and educational outcomes for children by helping to establish healthy eating habits from an early age.²

Despite these proven benefits, the current tiered payment system allows too many children to fall through the cracks. While school meals remain one of the federal government's most powerful tools for delivering good nutrition to children, the low eligibility threshold excludes many families who struggle to meet their most basic needs from receiving any assistance.

For example, a family of four living on just \$55,000 per year is ineligible for the free or reduced-price school meal program. With inflation levels and grocery prices at a historic high on top of Maryland's already high cost of living, many Maryland families living above this threshold still struggle financially and are unable to make school meal payments, leading to burdensome school meal debt. Additionally, obstacles such as language barriers, misinformation about the program, and stigma also keep many eligible families from even submitting school meal applications.

HB 696 aims to address these barriers to participation by ensuring that all Maryland students have access to the healthy school breakfast and lunch they need to grow and thrive in the classroom and beyond – advancing equity, ending stigma, and investing in Maryland's future.

MAP appreciates your consideration and urges the committee to issue a favorable report for HB 696.

Marylanders Against Poverty (MAP) is a coalition of service providers, faith communities, and advocacy organizations advancing statewide public policies and programs necessary to alleviate the burdens faced by Marylanders living in or near poverty, and to address the underlying systemic causes of poverty.

¹ Food Research & Action Center (2016). Research Brief: Breakfast for Learning. Available at <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforlearning-1.pdf>

² Food Research & Action Center (2021). School Meals are Essential Health and Learning. Available at <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning.pdf>