

## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 696

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

*House Ways and Means Committee*

February 14, 2024

Good afternoon Chairman Atterbeary, Sponsor Delegate Palokovich Carr and members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to come before you in support of House Bill 696.

As the Vice President Maryland School Nutrition Association, I support HB 696. This bill would provide School breakfast and lunch at no cost to Maryland students.

In Maryland, students should be able to access school meals with dignity. Our students should not have to worry about their current home life, family finances, and how their peers will view them if they are in need. Every week students go to school across Maryland and have free access to textbooks, transportation to and from school, and technology. However, in Maryland students still need funds to be able to eat meals. I support this bill because I feel students should be able to walk through the breakfast and lunch line without a nervous thought about whether they are running up a “tab” and creating more debt for their parents.

In Maryland 1 in 8 children are food insecure. I feel more families go uncounted and have needs but are too proud to ask on behalf of their students. I support a bill that would open the doors to the cafeteria, welcome students, and allow children to eat with dignity. This bill would allow the cafeteria to be a refuge, free of anxiety and worry, for a student. Should this bill pass, struggling students would be able to leave their worries at the cafeteria doors and have an equal seat at the cafeteria table among their peers. By supporting this bill Maryland will also join all the other states that have led the charge and provided Universal Meals to their students.

Give our children a sense of pride, dignity, and a good foundation to learn by funding free nutritious meals for our students.

Thank you, Chairman Atterbeary, Sponsor Delegate Palokovich Carr and members of the committee for allowing my brief statement of support for HB 696.

Cherie Cotsonas-Vice President of Maryland School Nutrition Association