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BILL: HB 696
TITLE: Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion
DATE: February 14, 2024
POSITION: Support
COMMITTEE: House Ways and Means Committee
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The Public School Superintendents’ Association of Maryland (PSSAM), on behalf of all twenty-four public school superintendents, **supports** House Bill 696.

This bill requires the State Board of Education to ensure that by fiscal 2026 schools that participate, respectively, in the federal School Breakfast Program must offer a free breakfast to all students and in the National School Lunch Program must offer a free lunch to all students. Beginning in fiscal 2026, the State is responsible for reimbursing a local board of education or a participating nonpublic school for the cost of offering free breakfasts and lunches meeting U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) guidelines. The State must (1) for schools participating in the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) pay the difference between the federal funds allocated to those schools and the cost of offering each student a meal, and (2) for other eligible schools, pay the difference for each student between the USDA free meal rate and paid meal rate. Some provisions exempting elementary schools from the requirement to provide a free breakfast are repealed.

PSSAM strongly supports this legislation and the State’s generous participation. Based on our experiences during Covid in feeding students and families, we are extremely confident that all twenty-four local school systems will be able to implement such an ambitious program effectively and efficiently.

The research on free meals for all students is vast and universally confirms the positive impact on student achievement, including academics and behavior. According to Madelein Levin and Jessie Hewins, the authors of *Universal Free School Meals: Ensuring That All Children are Able*

to Learn, their findings include increased participation in meal programs, in part due to the removal of the stigma of “free lunch.” In addition, there is no room for error in identifying food-challenged students with the elimination of paper applications. Students in school meal programs are also more likely to eat healthier foods, including fruits, vegetables, and milk. In turn, these healthier eating habits positively impact lower childhood obesity. Removing the transaction of paying for meals also results in more time for students to eat. According to Levin and Hewins, families also benefit strongly from free meal programs as it reduces their financial burden of purchasing two meals a day for their children.

Lastly, research shows that a consistently well-fed student is a better student, test-taker and participant in school. Participation in the free meal programs is also linked to fewer absences, increased attention span, decreased tardiness and behavior problems, and overall, an improved school environment.

For these reasons, PSSAM **supports** House Bill 696 and urges a favorable report.