



## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 696

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

*House Ways and Means Committee*

February 14, 2024

**Maryland Hunger Solutions strongly supports HB 696**, which aims to provide state funding for schools operating the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program to provide a healthy school breakfast and school lunch to all children at no cost to them or their families.

As a statewide, non-partisan, nonprofit working to end hunger in Maryland, Maryland Hunger Solutions strives to overcome existing barriers to state and federal nutrition assistance programs and create self-sustaining connections between Maryland residents and nutritious foods.

Among these nutrition programs, the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program play the most critical role as the nation's first line of defense against childhood food insecurity.

School meals have been shown to be some of the healthiest meals many children consume on a daily basis, providing students with nutrition they need to learn and thrive during the school day and beyond. [Multiple studies have linked participation in school meals to an incredible number of beneficial outcomes for students](#) including reduced food insecurity, decreased rates of obesity, and improved overall nutrition and wellness. Beyond reducing hunger, this research also links participation in school meals to positive educational outcomes such as enhanced child development and school readiness, and improved academic achievement, attendance, and classroom behavior.

During the height of the pandemic, federally funded free school meals served as a critical resource to keep children fed, alleviate child hunger, and advance racial equity and child well-being during a time of extreme uncertainty. The role that school meals played during the pandemic and subsequent school closures underscores the importance of this nutritional safety net to the health and well-being of Maryland communities.

The loss of federal pandemic-related funding for free school meals last school year has been devastating for Maryland students and families at a time when historically high inflation and grocery prices are driving the need for these programs higher than ever. Across the state, just over 407,000 Maryland students lost access to this benefit and are now required to pay for their school meals.

Maryland has made great strides in the past that have helped to mitigate the impact of this loss, such as covering the reduced-price copay for low-income families, and expanding the number of students directly certified for free meals through Medicaid data matching. Additionally, many eligible schools have been able to continue providing school meals to all students at no cost through the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). CEP provides federal reimbursement for schools that have high poverty rates that are directly certified from other federal programs. Research provided by Dr. Susan Gross of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health on the implementation of the CEP in Maryland



clearly shows that this universal meals program not only helps students and schools, but helps to reduce food insecurity in the community.

Despite these efforts, many families and school systems are now facing immense challenges with the return to a tiered payment system.

**Too many children who qualify for free school meals fall through the cracks due to stigma and administrative barriers.** When students perceive school meals as only for children from low-income households, many decline to participate, despite their hunger. Additional burdens such as literacy and language barriers also keep many eligible families from submitting school meal applications.

**The extremely low eligibility threshold excludes many more families.** For example, a family of four living off of just \$55,000 a year is unable to qualify for any assistance. With Maryland's already high cost of living and current inflation rates, more families than ever are struggling to make ends meet but do not qualify for free meals.

**School systems are reporting unprecedented increases in school meal debt.** Students and families are not the only ones facing these challenges. When families struggle to pay for school meals, schools take on the burden of those unpaid school meal fee, forcing them to spend valuable time and resources trying to find additional funds to cover their operating costs, often at the expense of general funds that would otherwise be used for educational programming and other important wraparound services.

**The solution remains clear.** Providing healthy school meals to all students at no cost was a proven success during the pandemic and in the 351 Maryland schools using CEP to continue offering school meals for free to all students, including every school in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Caroline County, Somerset County, Dorchester County, and Wicomico County.

Offering school meals to all students at no cost results in more children eating breakfast and lunch at school, allowing families to stretch their food budgets at home, and removing the burden of school meal debt from families and school systems. By passing and enacting HB 696, Maryland will be making an important step in advancing equity, supporting students' education and health, and improving school nutrition operations.

**Hungry children can't wait.** Now is the time for our state to act on this opportunity to make the smart investment in our children and Maryland's future.

Our national partner organization, the Food Research and Action Center, has been working with schools and states across the nation as they work to implement healthy school meal programs. Currently 8 state, including California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont have passed similar legislation.

While Maryland has previously missed out on this important opportunity, Maryland Hunger Solutions respectfully urges a favorable report on HB 696 so that we don't fall behind the growing list of states making investments in children's health and nutrition.

Thank you for your consideration.