



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**Testimony in Support of HB 696
Primary and Secondary Education - Breakfast and Lunch Programs - Universal
Expansion**

This legislation would make breakfast and lunch free for all public school students as well as for students at participating non-public schools (which serve students with disabilities).

Maryland is making historic investments in our public schools through the Blueprint for Maryland's Future to ensure that every child receives a world-class education. Yet these necessary investments will not meet their full potential when students are hungry. Simply put, hungry kids don't learn well.

One in eight children in Maryland face hunger on a daily basis; that adds up to more than 164,000 children across the state.¹ To put it into perspective, that's more kids than the populations of six Maryland counties combined.²

Any parent, guardian, or caregiver knows the mental load and worries associated with providing nutritious, wholesome, and affordable meals for their child in order to set them up for a productive day of learning. Rising food costs has made it increasingly difficult for Maryland families to obtain affordable and healthy breakfasts and lunches for their school-aged children.

Although some very low-income students can qualify for free school lunch, the federal income thresholds don't accurately reflect the financial needs of families. For instance, a child being raised by a single parent who makes more than \$36,500 is ineligible for a free lunch. For a family of four, the income cutoff is just over \$55,500.³ These income levels are well below the self-sufficiency standard for every county in Maryland.⁴

¹ <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/maryland#>

² Caroline, Dorchester, Garrett, Kent, Somerset County, and Talbot Counties

³ <https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/siteassets/schools/middle-schools/a-f/loiedermanms/free-and-reduced-price-meals-2022-23.pdf>

⁴ <https://maryland-cap.org/the-maryland-2023-self-sufficiency-standard-calculator/>

This legislation aims to alleviate the stressors and costs associated with school meals by expanding access to quality food for all students. The bill would piggyback on the breakfast and lunch programs in the federal Community Eligibility Provision—regarded as the nation’s first line of defense against childhood food insecurity—helping to minimize costs to the state. This federal program reimburses for meals served at schools with a high poverty rate; more than 350 Maryland schools currently benefit.

Background

The General Assembly has taken several steps to expand access to free and reduced price meals. In the late 1990s, Maryland passed the Maryland Meals for Achievement Program to provide state funding to supplement federal meal reimbursements for high poverty schools; 581 schools now benefit. In 2018, Maryland passed the Maryland Cares for Kids Act, phasing out the reduced-price copay, making school meals completely free for thousands of additional low-income students.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress authorized waivers to make school meals free for all children. That federal policy expired with the 2022-2023 school year.

Eight other states have picked up where Congress left off and are providing free school meals for all students.⁵ HB 696 would do the same in Maryland.

Improving Outcomes and Quality of Life for Students

Universal free school meals would ensure that students are able to eat at school without the stigma surrounding subsidized meals. No student in Maryland would have to endure bullying, discrimination, or shame for receiving a free meal or having lunch debt. Nor would schools have to navigate the cumbersome paperwork needed to track and enforce student meal debt. This legislation also advances equity by tackling systemic barriers to food access in disadvantaged communities.

Research strongly supports the correlation between quality meals and children’s ability to succeed. Benefits include improvements in students’ attendance, behavior, academic achievement, ability to focus, mental health, and reductions in tardiness, anxiety, and depression.⁶ Moreover, school meals are the highest quality food that many students receive in a given day.⁷

⁵ California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont.

⁶ Food Research & Action Center (2018). *Research Brief: The Connections Between Food Insecurity, the Federal Nutrition Programs, and Student Behavior*.

⁷ Liu, J., et al. (2021). *Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018*.