



*"Cultivating a collaborative, sustainable, and equitable food system for all Maryland communities."*

**February 12, 2024**  
**2024 SESSION SUPPORT TESTIMONY**  
**HB0696 Primary and Secondary Education -**  
**Breakfast and Lunch Programs - Universal**  
**Expansion**

**BILL: HB0696: Universal School Meals**  
**COMMITTEE: House Ways and Means Committee**  
**POSITION: Testimony of Support of House Bill 0696**

Honorable Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record in support of House Bill 0696.

This letter is submitted on behalf of the Maryland Food System Resiliency Council. The Food System Resiliency Council was established by the Maryland General Assembly during the 2021 legislative session to bring together 33 appointed council members from across the state, all with different points of entry and expertise to work toward a more resilient food system and address the food system crisis due to COVID-19. One of the key mandates of this Council is to develop equitable and sustainable policy recommendations to increase the long-term resiliency of Maryland's food system.

One way this can be achieved is by providing free meals to all Maryland students. This bill is necessary for investing in the health and academic success of students in Maryland.

Oftentimes, school meals are the most reliable source of food for students. A stable diet helps students focus in class which sets them up for success throughout the school day. This bill would also ease the pressure on household food budgets and reduce administrative work for school staff by eliminating school meal debt - ending the financial burden that debt creates for families and school districts. Like desks, textbooks, and transportation, school meals are vital to student success and deserve investment.

We urge Maryland to join states such as California, Colorado, Maine, and Massachusetts in adopting universal school meals. This bill will benefit students, their families, and the school system financially all while supporting the academic success of Maryland's youth.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our support of HB0696.

Michael J. Wilson

Co-Chair, Maryland Food System Resiliency Council