



MARYLAND
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE

February 14, 2024

HB 696
Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion

House Ways & Means Committee
Position: FAVORABLE

The Maryland Catholic Conference offers this testimony in support of House Bill 696. The Catholic Conference is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals and numerous charities combine to form our state's second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government. We also offer this testimony on behalf of the families of approximately 50,000 students served by over 150 PreK-12 Catholic schools in Maryland, as well as the one in every eight Maryland students educated in a nonpublic school, particularly the many whose schools participate in the Federal School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program.

House Bill 696 would allow schools participating in the Federal School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program to feed all students a free breakfast or lunch, respectively. The bill would allow the State to subsidize the cost of the free meals not provided through federal funding for both programs. Participating schools would not be authorized to charge any student for meals under either program.

Our nonpublic schools that serve low-income students often operate on very tight budgets. Thus, some that would like to participate in the Community Eligibility Provision Program cannot, due to an inability to afford the cost gap out of the schools' budgets that would be required in order to do so. This legislation might allow more schools to participate in that program and, thus, more kids to be fed, alleviating the burden on parents.

Although Maryland is the wealthiest state in the country, one in eight households in Maryland face constant food insecurity. Sadly, children and adolescents are not exempt from that statistic. School breakfast and lunch programs are essential to not only ending hunger, but for improving the health and educational outcomes of students who live with food insecurity.

Well over 100,000 meals are currently served annually to low-income students in nonpublic schools through these federal programs. This bill purports to ensure that all students in the State of Maryland whose schools participate in the free feeding programs are provided completely free breakfast and lunch, regardless of federal funding limitations. It is for these reasons that the Maryland Catholic Conference asks for a favorable report for House Bill 696.