



Montgomery County Community Action Board Testimony
HB696 - Primary and Secondary Education - Breakfast and Lunch Programs - Universal Expansion
February 14, 2024
SUPPORT

TO: The Honorable Vanessa Atterbeary; The Honorable Jheanelle Wilkins, Vice Chair; and Members of the Ways and Means Committee

FROM: Dr. Jeffery Johnson, Chair, Montgomery County Community Action Board

The Montgomery County Community Action Board (CAB), the County’s local, state, and federally designated anti-poverty group, is in full support of HB696 and asks the Committee for a favorable report. This bill would ensure that all children attending schools that participate in the free and reduced meals program will have access to free breakfast and lunch on every school day.

As the governing body, along with the Head Start Parent Policy Council, of the Montgomery County Head Start Program that serves 648 low-income children and their families, we are well aware of the importance of school nutrition programs and recognize the role that school meals play in providing improved access to nutritious meals for low-income school children. Of note, over one-third of children in Montgomery County Public Schools are eligible for Free and Reduced Meals.¹ Not all eligible students receive these meals, though. Universal access will ensure that all children have access to nutritious meals, even if the parent or guardian did not complete the application in a timely fashion. Universal access eliminates the stigma; it is no longer obvious who is low-income and receiving a free or reduced cost meal—all students are receiving the same meal.

Support for food and nutrition programs, including school meals programs, has been a longstanding priority for our board because food insecurity remains a serious challenge here in Montgomery County and across the state. The food insecurity rate in Maryland is 9%, meaning that 543,650 residents struggle with *a lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life.*² It is important to note that food insecurity is compounded in areas like Montgomery County and so many parts of the state, where the cost of living is extremely high, and wages have not kept up. According to the Montgomery County Self-Sufficiency Standard, a household with two working adults, one preschooler, and one school-age child would need to earn \$122,943 annually to cover their basic necessities, over four times the federal poverty level.³

We ask the Committee for a favorable report and ask that you consider other policies that will reduce food insecurity in Maryland.

¹<https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/food-and-nutrition/about-us/#:~:text=Approximately%2035%25%20of%20MCPS%20students,gap%E2%80%9D%20when%20school%20is%20out>

² <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2020/overall/maryland>

³https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/MDMontCo2023_SSS.pdf