



Testimony in Support of HB0696
Primary and Secondary Education - Breakfast and Lunch Programs - Universal
Expansion
Ways and Means Committee
February 14, 2024

Prince George's County Food Equity Council
1401 Mercantile Lane Suite #481
Largo, MD 20774

Dear Members of the House Ways and Means Committee,

I am writing to you today on behalf of the Prince George's County Food Equity Council to express our wholehearted support for House Bill 0696 - Primary and Secondary Education - Breakfast and Lunch Programs - Universal Expansion. As a staff member of our local food policy council, I have witnessed firsthand the impact of inadequate nutrition on the lives of children in Prince George's County. We believe all children should have free school meals, allowing them to concentrate on their education without hunger.

School meals are not merely a provision of sustenance; they are a fundamental component of academic success, childhood hunger reduction, and the promotion of overall well-being. Our mission aligns closely with the belief that nutritious meals contribute significantly to positive education and health outcomes for children. Like textbooks, computers, and transportation, we firmly believe that school meals should be accessible to all students, every school day.

However, the current structure of school nutrition programs often excludes many children in need, as their families may need to meet the eligibility threshold for no-cost meals. This threshold creates a gap where families, despite facing financial challenges, still need to qualify for the assistance their children require. Furthermore, the stigma associated with paying for meals leads eligible students, particularly in middle and high school, to opt-out, exacerbating the issue of childhood hunger.

The pandemic has shown us a viable alternative. Schools successfully offered free meals to all students, regardless of their learning mode, during the 2020-2021 school year. This trial run demonstrated the undeniable benefits of providing meals at no cost to all students, benefiting children, families, and schools alike.



PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY
FoodEquityCouncil

*Cultivating justice and economic
opportunity from farm to fork.*

Universal access to school meals, irrespective of household income, can eliminate stigma, alleviate financial strain on families, and simplify administrative processes for school staff. By ensuring that all students receive nutritious breakfasts and lunches, we can create a positive and inclusive cafeteria environment, eliminating the burdensome issue of unpaid school meal fees and fostering an atmosphere where every student can thrive.

Moreover, the importance of this initiative extends beyond the classroom. It is a crucial step towards advancing racial equity and justice, ensuring that students from Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities have equal access to the essential nutrition they need for academic success and personal development.

Hungry kids cannot learn effectively. Now, more than ever, we urge Maryland to make this vital investment to guarantee all students access to the healthy meals they need to thrive. We firmly support HB0696 as a progressive and necessary step towards a brighter, more equitable future for the children of Prince George's County and the entire state of Maryland.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this critical matter.

Sincerely,

Heaven Jordan

Heaven Jordan

Prince George's County Food Equity Council