



BOARD OF TRUSTEES

February 14, 2024

COMMITTEE: House Ways and Means Committee

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

POSITION: Support

The Horizon Foundation is the largest independent health philanthropy in Maryland. We are committed to a Howard County free from systemic inequities, where all people can live abundant and healthy lives.

The Foundation is pleased to support HB 696 – Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion.

HB 696 would require Maryland schools that participate in the federal School Breakfast Program or the National School Lunch Program to offer each student those meals at no cost, beginning in FY 2025. Those meals would also be required to meet nutritional standards set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for those programs.

Children’s food insecurity has been a problem across the nation for many years but became a glaring crisis in the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic when schools – which are many students’ primary or only source of healthy food during the day – closed. Rightly so, the federal government granted waivers to schools to offer universal free school lunch to students through the pandemic, and communities across the nation, including Howard County, came together to try and fill the gaps to ensure children did not go hungry. Those pandemic-era waivers have expired, requiring families to qualify for these programs once again based on income.

Like other communities across the state, Howard County families have felt the pain of rising food costs and an increasingly high cost of living. Though the County is known as an affluent county, students and families from lower- and middle-income households are at risk of, or are already experiencing, food insecurity. Some of these families who are struggling may not apply for or even qualify for the current free and reduced meals programs. HB 696 would ensure that no student falls through the cracks or has to worry about whether they will have food to eat during the day.

A 2022 report from the Food Research & Action Center studied 62 large school districts across the country who used universal meal waivers during the pandemic. The findings were clear: 95 percent of districts said meal waivers decreased hunger among their students; 89 percent said the waivers

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made it easier for parents and guardians; 85 percent said they erased the stigma associated with free school meals; and 82 percent reported that they supported academic achievement.¹ To help our students be healthy and successful, and to ease the burden on families who may be struggling to make ends meet, universal school meals should be made permanent.

Providing healthy school meals has long been a priority for the Horizon Foundation. Years ago, we launched a pilot program with the Howard County Public School System to increase fruit and vegetable offerings and offer more nutritious meals at three elementary schools. That program is now standard in every Howard County school. Students of every age in Howard County and across Maryland deserve healthy food to eat and no child should ever go hungry. For this reason, the Horizon Foundation **SUPPORTS HB 696** and urges a **FAVORABLE** report.

Thank you for your consideration.

¹ Food Research & Action Center. Large School District Report 2022: <https://frac.org/large-school-district-report-2022>