



## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 696

### Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion

*House Ways and Means*

February 12, 2024

Dear Chair Atterbeary, Vice-Chair Wilkins, and Members of the House Ways and Means Committee,

The Anne Arundel County Food Bank strongly supports HB 696, which aims to expand access to school meals by providing state funds to cover the cost of school breakfast and school lunch for all students in schools participating in the National School Lunch or School Breakfast Program.

School meals play an important role in supporting academic success, reducing childhood hunger, supporting good nutrition, and ensuring that students are well-nourished and ready to get the most out of the school day. Extensive research has linked participation in school meals to several benefits:

- improved academic achievement, standardized test scores, and cognitive function ;
- improved attendance, which is positively linked to academic achievement;
- reduced food insecurity, which is linked to poor academic outcomes;
- improved nutrition, such as increased consumption of fruit, vegetables, and milk;
- improved overall health and long-term health outcomes, as well as reduction in obesity rates, anxiety, and depression.

As vital as these school nutrition programs are, too many children miss out on school meals because of the current structure. Many struggling families do not meet the eligibility criteria for no-cost meals, which for the 2023-2024 school year requires a family of four to earn less than \$55,500 annually. With the cost of living on the rise, there are too many Maryland families who struggle financially to meet their most basic needs and yet do not qualify because their income exceeds this incredibly low eligibility threshold.

Now is the time for Maryland to make this critical investment in our children and communities. Schools were able to offer school meals at no cost beginning in the spring of 2020 through the 2021-2022 school year during the height of the pandemic. This trial run showed how beneficial offering meals at no cost to all students is for children, families, and schools.

Providing school meals at no cost to all students would support equity in the classroom by making sure every child has the nutrition they need to excel. These meals are just as important to students' academic success as textbooks or transportation and should be treated as a critical component of education. When students are distracted by hunger because they are unable to participate in school breakfast or lunch, they miss out on the chance to learn and benefit from the important opportunities offered by Maryland's education system. Additionally, it would ease the pressure on household food budgets and reduce administrative work for school staff by eliminating school meal debt and ending the financial burden that debt creates for families and school districts.

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*Feeding Anne Arundel Since 1986*



Hungry kids can't wait. It's time for Maryland to make Healthy School Meals for All a priority and join the growing list of states that have guaranteed all students have access to the healthy meals they need to grow and thrive.

As such, we thank you for your consideration and urge a favorable report on HB 696

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Leah Paley".

Leah Aiello Paley, LMSW  
Chief Executive Officer  
Anne Arundel County Food Bank