



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**Testimony in Support of HB 1254**  
**Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program - Establishment**

HB 1254 would fund free school meals for 90,000 additional students at 200 schools across Maryland. This investment in our students is needed to ensure that our highest-needs students aren't going hungry and can take full advantage of the investments in their education we are making in the Blueprint for Maryland's Future.

This bill would establish a Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program within the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). Under the program, MSDE would provide \$10 million in supplemental funding for free school meals to schools with high concentrations of poverty. The proposed program would piggyback off of the federal Community Eligibility Provision program.

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a federal program that allows high-poverty schools to serve free breakfast and lunch to all students. In Maryland, more than 670 schools participate—reaching 370,000 students across the state. Students in CEP schools are approximately three times less likely to experience food insecurity compared to those in eligible schools that do not participate in the program.<sup>1</sup> Research has shown other benefits, including better academic performance, reduced stigma for students, and improved staff morale.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these benefits, Maryland is currently leaving federal money on the table. Many schools qualify for federal funding under the CEP but need some state matching dollars in order to afford to participate. The \$10 million in annual funding in HB 1254 would help up to 200 additional schools opt into CEP and would provide breakfast and lunch to over 90,000 additional students across the state.

HB 1254 is especially important because of potential funding cuts from Congress. Congress is considering slashing school meal funding by \$12 billion by raising the CEP eligibility threshold from 25% ISP to 60% ISP, meaning a school would need to have at least

<sup>1</sup> Gross, S.M., et al. (2019). Household food security status of families with children attending schools that participate in the community eligibility provision (CEP) and those with children attending schools that are CEP-eligible, but not participating. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*.

<sup>2</sup> Hecht, A., et al. (2021). Universal free school meals through the Community Eligibility Provision: Maryland food service provider perspectives. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* (pp. 1–22).

60% (instead of 25%) of its students identified as eligible for free meals to qualify for federal funding. Under Congress's current proposal, as many as 400 of Maryland's 670 CEP schools would become ineligible for federal funding, resulting in more than 250,000 Maryland kids losing access to free school meals. The funding HB 1254 provides will protect some schools from future federal cuts.

## **Background**

The General Assembly has taken several steps to expand access to free and reduced-price meals. In the late 1990s, Maryland passed the Maryland Meals for Achievement Program to provide state funding to supplement federal meal reimbursements for high-poverty schools; students in hundreds of schools now benefit. In 2018, Maryland passed the Maryland Cares for Kids Act, phasing out the reduced-price copay, making school meals completely free for thousands of additional low-income students.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress authorized waivers to make school meals free for all children. That federal policy expired with the 2022-2023 school year. Eight states picked up where Congress left off and are providing free school meals for all students.<sup>3</sup>

## **Improving Outcomes and Quality of Life for Students**

Maryland is making historic investments in our public schools through the Blueprint for Maryland's Future to ensure that every child receives a world-class education. However, students cannot learn if they are hungry.

One in six children in Maryland face hunger on a daily basis; that's 221,000 kids in total.<sup>4</sup> To put that into perspective, that's more children than the populations of six Maryland counties combined. The latest data shows a sharp increase in childhood hunger from even just the year prior.

Research strongly supports the correlation between quality meals and children's ability to succeed. Benefits include improvements in students' attendance, behavior, academic achievement, ability to focus, mental health, and reductions in tardiness, anxiety, and depression.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, school meals are the highest quality food that many students receive in a given day,<sup>6</sup> and most students consume as much as half of their daily calories at school.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/maryland#>

<sup>5</sup> Food Research & Action Center (2018). *Research Brief: The Connections Between Food Insecurity, the Federal Nutrition Programs, and Student Behavior*.

<sup>6</sup> Liu, J., et al. (2021). *Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018*.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/school-nutrition/about/index.html>