



## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 1254

### Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment

March 5, 2025

Dear Members of the House Appropriations Committee,

I strongly support HB 1254 – Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment, which would provide school meals at no cost to all students attending high-poverty schools or schools in high-poverty districts through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

Although I am writing this letter as a life-long Maryland resident and parent of children in Baltimore County Schools, I bring extensive experience through my profession as a Nutritional Epidemiologist who has spent over 15 years studying policies that promote child health and healthy eating and policies that reduce food insecurity among families. The evidence is clear- policies that increase access to school meals lead to increased school meal participation, which leads to both reduced hunger and improved healthy eating patterns for children. This is particularly relevant for children living in communities serving lower income families- the children who will benefit from this bill.

In addition to my profession, I have taken on service roles including serving as the elected chair of the Maryland State School Health Council (2018-present), the co-chair of the CDC Nutrition Obesity Policy Research and Evaluation Network (NOPREN) School Wellness Working Group (2014-present), and a governor-appointed member of the Baltimore County Board of Education (2000-2023). In each of these positions, I have had the opportunity to learn about the impact of CEP on children, families, schools, districts, and communities. In recent years, during meetings and webinars for both the State School Health Council and CDC School Wellness Working Group, we featured local and national research and on-the-ground experiences with CEP among schools and districts. CEP benefits children and families by providing access to healthy school meals at no cost while also reducing the stigma of being singled out as someone who needs school meals and eliminating the concept of school meal debt for individual children. Schools and districts benefit via greater meal participation (which helps meal programs), a reduction in paperwork to deem individual children as eligible, and the elimination of school meal debt. Finally, communities benefit through ensuring that all children have access to healthy breakfast and lunch at school, which supports attendance, learning, and much more. Hearing this work solidified my support for expanding CEP (and, ultimately, healthy school meals for all children). The proudest moment from my time on the Board of Education occurred when I made a motion to expand CEP to all eligible schools (changing from 4 to 87 schools) which was supported by the full Board. Ultimately, in part due to the district's positive experience with CEP, in 2023-2024 Baltimore County chose to transition to 100% CEP.

In closing, I want to reiterate that access to school meals, at no cost, for entire schools and districts, through CEP, benefits children, families, schools, districts, and communities. **I ask the committee to make a favorable report on HB 1254.**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Erin R. Hager".

Erin R. Hager, PhD

Erin R. Hager, PhD Associate Professor

Department of Population, Family and Reproductive Health

615 North Wolfe Street, Room E4539 Baltimore, MD 21205-2179 ehager1@jhu.edu

[www.publichealth.jhu.edu](http://www.publichealth.jhu.edu) | [www.marylandschoolwellness.org](http://www.marylandschoolwellness.org) | [www.marylandpublicschools.org/MSSHC](http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/MSSHC)