



Testimony to House Appropriations Committee

Hearing Title: Community Eligibility Provision Bill HB 1254

March 5, 2025

Greetings Chairman Barnes, Vice Chairman Chang and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB769 Community Eligibility Provision. I am Cherie Cotsonas, President-Elect Maryland School Nutrition Association. For over 20 years I have worked in school nutrition, and I have personally watched the strain grow on the School Nutrition Program in my county and of my colleague's nutrition programs across the state of Maryland. Each year we have families send their students to school with no means to pay for their meals. The fact that a child has no funds to pay for a meal does not remove the hunger they are feeling in the pit of their stomach when they arrive at school at 7:00 am or at 11:00 am when they go to lunch.

In St. Mary's County we have had an increase in the student meal account debt over the past few years. Our current debt is over \$95,000 and climbing. We expanded our ability to offer free breakfast through the Maryland Meals for Achievement program at 11 schools. Over the past two years our department has enrolled four of our eligible elementary schools in CEP. The CEP school parents, teachers, and administrators see the advantage of students receiving free breakfast and lunch through the CEP program. The schools participating in this program see a decreased anxiety among students during breakfast and lunch because the students have free access to meals. Teachers report students are more attentive when they can take advantage of free breakfast and lunch at their schools.

I encourage you to continue providing funding to eligible schools that participate in the Community Eligibility Provision. This bill is essential to address the highest needs that our children in Maryland need to have met each day.

The students of today are our future of tomorrow's Maryland.

By providing funding we can continue the programs that are reaching our most vulnerable population, stop at least four of the schools from increasing school nutrition program debt, and support the growth of a healthier generation.

Thank you for considering my testimony regarding HB 1254. Your support is vital to the wellbeing of our students in Maryland public schools.

Sincerely,
Cherie Cotsonas
President Elect, Maryland School Nutrition Association