



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 1254

Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment

House Appropriations Committee

March 5, 2025

Hon. Chair Barnes, Vice-Chair Chang and Members of the Appropriation Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 1254 which requires the Governor to allocate funding to eligible schools that participate in the federal community eligibility provision (CEP) of the child nutrition programs expanding nourishing school meals in schools to Maryland students who need it most; appropriates \$10,000,000. My name is Dawn Crayco, and I am the Northeast Regional Policy Director for FoodCorps, a national organization that partners with schools and communities to nourish kids' health and education. Across the state for the '24-'25 school year, FoodCorps has 4 members in working in Baltimore City Public Schools through a partnership with the school district via [Great Kids Farms](#) where they support nourishing school meals, provide food, garden, and nutrition education aligning with academic priorities, and help build community through food.

In Baltimore City Public Schools where we work this year will mark the 10-year anniversary of full CEP adoption allowing for all City students to eat free school lunch. In the 2023 - 2024 school year more than 73,000 meals were served each day – with the alleviation of the administrative burden of having families apply for free and reduced meals, paying for meals, and potentially putting families into debt has allowed to Food and Nutrition department to focus on the quality of the school food to align with the students needs.

School meals play an important role in reducing childhood hunger and ensuring that students are fueled up and ready to learn. However, too many children miss out on the benefits of school meals statewide because of the current tiered payment structure, which requires a family of four to earn less than \$57,000 annually to qualify for no-cost meals.

The CEP is a proven solution to this issue. This federal program allows high-poverty schools to serve free breakfast and lunch to all students, including in over 670 Maryland schools – reaching over 370,000 students across the state. Research has shown that CEP schools experience a range of benefits, including: increased meal participation, reduced stigma for students, elimination of school meal debt, and

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improved staff morale¹. Additionally, **students in CEP schools are approximately three times less likely to experience food insecurity** compared to those in eligible schools that do not participate².

Despite these benefits, not all schools are able to use CEP because of limitations in the current federal reimbursement structure. Establishing a state CEP supplement would help make the program financially sustainable for more schools. This \$10 million per year investment from the state could help up to 200 additional schools opt into CEP and offer breakfast and lunch to the over 90,000 students attending those schools.

With the cost of living rising and more families struggling to meet basic needs, expanding the number of CEP schools in Maryland would be a game-changer for many students and their families. HB 1254 would be an important steppingstone in Maryland's journey towards Healthy School Meals for All, helping to reduce hunger, improve student health and academic performance, and ease the financial burden on families already facing challenges.

Hungry kids can't wait. Now is the time for Maryland to make this critical investment to ensure more schools across the state are hunger-free!

Thank you for your consideration. We ask the committee to make a favorable report on HB 1254.

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¹ Hecht, A., Neff, R., Kelley, T., & Pollack Porter, K. (2021). Universal free schools meals through the Community Eligibility Provision: Maryland food service provider perspectives. In *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* (pp. 1–22). Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2021.102.033>.

² Gross, S.M., Kelley, T.L., Augustyn, M., Wilson, M.J., Bassarab, K., and Palmer, A. (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*. 2019 October; doi: 10.1080/19320248.2019.1679318.