



February 26, 2025

RE: Written Testimony in Support of SB 769, Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment, Prepared for the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee Hearing

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. I am submitting testimony on behalf of the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a science-based consumer advocacy organization and member of the Healthy School Meals for All Maryland Coalition.<sup>i</sup> I am also a Prince George's County, Maryland resident and a mother of two young children. I would like to take this opportunity to express strong support for expanding access to free school meals for more Maryland students, as proposed in SB 769. CSPI is a fierce defendant of science-based nutrition standards for school meals and has worked on improving school food for decades. Prior to our involvement in the passage of the federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which led to sweeping improvements in school nutrition, CSPI worked with state and local advocates to pass innovative school nutrition policies across the country. Following the Trump administration's 2018 rule that weakened school nutrition standards, CSPI sued the Administration and won, ultimately getting their rule overturned. s, including involvement in approximately a dozen statewide healthy school meals for all campaigns.

**CSPI urges the committee to make a favorable report on SB 769.** SB 769 aims to expand access to school meals and increase the number of hunger-free schools in Maryland by making the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) financially viable to eligible schools. CEP is an existing federal provision that allows high-poverty schools and districts to provide school meals at no cost to all students.

### **Expanding Access to School Meals Will Provide Needed Economic Support for Families**

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, federal funds allowed all students nationwide to receive free breakfast and lunch, regardless of household income.<sup>ii</sup> Despite an overwhelmingly positive response from school districts, families, and public health and education advocates, Congress allowed this provision to expire in summer 2022.<sup>iii</sup> In response to this change, several states, including California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont have moved to ensure free access to school meals for students statewide.<sup>iv</sup> SB 769 would be an important steppingstone towards ensuring every student in Maryland has access to free school meals.

Maryland has already recognized the critical role school meals play. The Maryland Meals for Achievement program allows eligible schools to offer free breakfast in the classroom,<sup>v</sup> and the Maryland Cares for Kids Act of 2018 ensures any child eligible for free or reduced-price meals receives a free meal.<sup>vi</sup> However, even with these policies, current eligibility criteria leave far too many Maryland children behind, including those from lower and middle-class families struggling to make ends meet. This school year, for a student to receive free meals in Maryland, their household income cannot exceed \$58,000 annually for a family of four. Inflation is hurting families' budgets, and many cannot shoulder the cost of school meals. For those who do qualify for free meals, stigma and shame associated with qualifying prevent students from participating.<sup>vii</sup> Nowhere else during the school day do we require proof of family income like we do in the cafeteria. For example, schools willingly provide books and transportation regardless of family income. School meals, which are an invaluable opportunity to instill healthy eating habits for life, and critical for ensuring that children are ready to learn, should be treated no differently.

## **Expanding Access to School Meals Will Promote Nutrition, Food Security, and Academic Performance**

A systematic review examining free school meals for all policies found that they are positively associated with school meal participation, and in many cases, are positively associated with diet quality, food security, and academic performance.<sup>viii</sup> Research shows that in 2017-2018, food consumed at school was the highest quality source of food for kids – followed by grocery stores, other sources, worksites, and restaurants.<sup>ix</sup>

## **Expanding Access to School Meals Can Advance Equity**

Expanding access to school meals through CEP can remove stigma for children participating in the program and provide equitable access to healthy meals. A recent report found that when all students have access to free meals, perceptions of bullying and fighting decrease outside of school and kids that previously were income-eligible for free- or reduced-priced meals felt safer inside the school, including the cafeteria.<sup>x</sup> Expanding access to school meals will help ensure that children who might be on the edges of eligibility, or children who are experiencing homelessness, have recently immigrated, have caregivers who may struggle with administrative paperwork, or are in foster care do not fall through the cracks.

No child deserves to be hungry at school. Now is the time for Maryland to make this critical investment in school meals to ensure the health and wellbeing of all children.

As such, I thank you for your consideration and urge a favorable report on SB 769.



Meghan Maroney  
Campaign Manager, Federal Child Nutrition Programs  
Center for Science in the Public Interest

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<sup>i</sup> Healthy School Meals for All Maryland Coalition. *Healthy School Meals for All Maryland*. 2025. [Healthy School Meals for All Maryland](#). Accessed February 24, 2025.

<sup>ii</sup> Families First Coronavirus Response Act. P.L. 116-127 § 2202, 134 Stat. 185.

<sup>iii</sup> Keep Kids Fed Act of 2022. P.L. 117-158.

<sup>iv</sup> Food Research and Action Center. *Raise Your Hand for Healthy School Meals for All*. February 2025. [Healthy School Meals for All \(frac.org\)](#). Accessed February 24, 2025.

<sup>v</sup> Maryland Hunger Solutions. Maryland Meals for Achievement. 2020. <https://www.mdhungersolutions.org/federal-nutrition-programs/school-breakfast-program-sbp/maryland-meals-for-achievement/>. Accessed February 24, 2025.

<sup>vi</sup> Maryland Cares for Kids Act. H.B. 315. 2018.

<sup>vii</sup> Cohen J et al. Impact of Massachusetts' Healthy School Meals for All Policy on Families. Nourish Lab at the Center for Health Inclusion, Research and Practice. June 2023. [https://www.childnourishlab.org/files/ugd/383bcd\\_45ee5fed8e224ffd8639f0f498086e31.pdf](https://www.childnourishlab.org/files/ugd/383bcd_45ee5fed8e224ffd8639f0f498086e31.pdf). Accessed February 24, 2025.

<sup>viii</sup> Cohen J, et al. Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review. *Nutrients*. 2021; 13(3):911.

<sup>ix</sup> Liu J, et al. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021;4(4):e215262.

<sup>x</sup> Gutierrez E. The Effect of Universal Free Meals on Student Perceptions of School Climate: Evidence from New York City. Pages 22, 24. June 2021. EdWorkingPaper: 21-430. Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University.