

**Testimony in Support of HB 769 – Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program -
Establishment**

Senate Budget & Taxation Committee

Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

February 26, 2025

FAVORABLE

Free State PTA (FSPTA) represents over 70,000 volunteer members and families in over 500 public schools. As the state's premier and largest child advocacy organization, Free State PTA is a powerful voice for all children, a relevant resource for families, schools and communities, and a strong advocate for public education. ***We are offering a favorable testimony in support of Senate Bill 769.***

Too many children miss out on the benefits of school meals 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 Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a proven solution to this issue. 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 improved staff morale. Additionally, students in CEP schools are approximately three times less likely to experience food insecurity compared to those in eligible schools that do not participate. 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.***

This legislation is an essential investment for the health and academic success of Maryland students. Supporting this bill would be supporting equity in the classroom and making sure every child has the nourishment they need to excel. These meals are important to students' academic success just as textbooks or transportation are and should be treated as a critical component to education. When students are distracted by hunger because they are unable to afford school breakfast or lunch, they miss out on the chance to learn and benefit from the important opportunities offered by Maryland's education system. Hungry kids can't learn. Ensuring that every child in the state has access to a nutritious school breakfast and lunch every day is a critical and effective investment in Maryland's communities and future. Free State PTA urges the committee to issue a favorable report on SB 769.

Testimony is presented on behalf of

Gerrod Tyler, President

GTyler@FSPTA.org

<https://www.fspta.org/>