

Chairman Guzzone
Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
Testimony: FAVORABLE

Ayesha B. Holmes
No Kid Hungry, MD
aholmes@strength.org

**Testimony IN FAVOR of SB769
Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Expansion Program**

Dear Chair Guzzone and Members of the Committee:

My name is Ayesha Holmes, and I am the Director of No Kid Hungry Maryland. Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding the impact of SB 769, to establish the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Expansion Program to provide funding for eligible schools that participate in the federal community eligibility provision of child nutrition programs.

No Kid Hungry Maryland is a campaign of the national anti-hunger organization Share Our Strength. Since 2008, Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry Maryland campaign has worked with partners, schools, and advocates to end childhood hunger throughout the state. No Kid Hungry Maryland leads the Partnership to End Childhood Hunger in Maryland.

CEP positively benefits both students and schools. When children have consistent access to nutritious meals, they are more focused in class, attend school more regularly, and have fewer disciplinary issues. For families struggling to stretch their food budgets, CEP ensures that their children receive two healthy meals each day, alleviating financial stress at home. By eliminating out-of-pocket costs and reducing stigma, CEP promotes equity, ensuring every child has the nutrition they need to succeed.

Additionally, CEP eliminates administrative burdens like meal applications, fee-based counting, and claiming and unpaid meal charges. With simplified meal service, school nutrition teams can focus on delivering high-quality meals and implementing innovative models like breakfast in the classroom. These efficiencies often result in increased meal participation, financial stability, and even revenue generation for school nutrition budgets. *In short, CEP doesn't just feed kids, it strengthens schools.*

We support efforts to encourage CEP participation, but improvements are needed to ensure funding is allocated fairly and effectively. We recommend a few key adjustments to ensure this program serves the students intended.

- **Clarify the Use of "Concentration of Poverty":** If this term aligns with the definition in the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, it should be explicitly stated.
- **Ensure Funding Prioritization is Clear and Fair:** The legislation states that funding must be distributed "based on the concentration of poverty," we recommend the language be revised to: *"distributed to public schools under the jurisdiction of the county board with the highest concentration of poverty that do not already receive the federal free reimbursement rate for all meals."*
- **Address Geographic Diversity Concerns:** Clear criteria are necessary to ensure fair and equitable access to incentives.
- **Define Eligibility for Public vs. Non-Public Schools:** The bill is inconsistent, Sec. E (1-2) refers to public schools, but Sec. G includes non-public schools. This must be clarified to prevent misinterpretation and ensure accountability.
- **Set a Clear Deadline for Schools:** Schools must know whether they qualify for state funds *before* the CEP election deadline (June 30th). A firm deadline must be established to allow informed decision-making.

On behalf of No Kid Hungry Maryland, I urge you to support and strengthen SB 798 to create a more equitable and effective school meal program for our state's children.