



## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 769

### Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program - Establishment

*Senate Budget & Taxation Committee*

*Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee*

February 26, 2025

**Maryland Hunger Solutions strongly supports SB 769**, which aims to provide state funding for schools opting into the Community Eligibility Provision to provide a healthy school breakfast and school lunch to all children at no cost to them or their families.

As a statewide, non-partisan, nonprofit working to end hunger in Maryland, Maryland Hunger Solutions strives to overcome existing barriers to state and federal nutrition assistance programs and create self-sustaining connections between Maryland residents and nutritious foods. Among these nutrition programs, the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program play the most critical role as the nation's first line of defense against childhood food insecurity.

The school meal programs have been shown to be some of the healthiest meals children consume on a daily basis, providing students with nutrition they need to learn and thrive during the school day and beyond. [Multiple studies have linked participation in school meals to an incredible number of beneficial outcomes for students](#) including reduced food insecurity, decreased rates of obesity, and improved overall nutrition and wellness. Beyond reducing hunger, this research also links participation in school meals to positive educational outcomes such as enhanced child development and school readiness, and improved academic achievement, attendance, and classroom behavior.

Maryland has made great strides in the past to expand access to school meals, such as covering the reduced-price copay for low-income families, and expanding the number of students directly certified for free meals through Medicaid data matching. However, the most effective way that schools can expand access to school meals is by participating in the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which is an existing federal provision that allows high-poverty schools and districts to provide school meals at no cost to students.

Schools and districts operating CEP do not charge a fee to students for school meals and instead receive federal reimbursements for meals served using a formula based on the percentage of children who are eligible to be directly certified for free meals without an application. This percentage is multiplied by 1.6 to calculate the percentage of meals reimbursed at the federal free rate (the highest federal reimbursement rate), and the remainder are reimbursed at the paid rate (the lowest federal reimbursement rate).

For example, a school with 50 percent directly certified students would be reimbursed for 80 percent of the meals eaten at the free reimbursement rate ( $50\% \times 1.6 = 80\%$ ), and the remaining 20 percent would be reimbursed at the paid rate.

Since its establishment in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, the CEP has served as a critical resource for school districts to help keep children fed, alleviate child hunger, and advance racial equity and child well-being. The benefits we have seen from serving all students school meals at no cost through CEP underscore the importance of this nutritional safety net to the health and well-being of Maryland communities. Research conducted in Maryland points to the benefits of CEP, which include more children eating breakfast and lunch at school, families' ability to stretch their food budgets at home, and removing the burden of school meal debt from families and school systems.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, a study conducted by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health on the implementation of the CEP in Maryland clearly shows that students who attend CEP schools are almost three times less likely to be food insecure than their counterparts attending CEP eligible schools that don't participate in the program.<sup>2</sup>

Currently, **there are over 670 Maryland schools across 19 counties successfully using CEP to offer school meals for free to all 370,000 of their students**, including every school in Allegany County, Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Caroline County, Dorchester County, Kent County, Somerset County, and Wicomico County. **However, there are still just over 400 eligible schools across the state that are not participating**, in part due to the inadequate nature of the federal reimbursement formula that CEP schools use to calculate the funding they receive for meals served (Table 1).

CEP has played a fundamental role in supporting schools with a high percentage of students who reside in households experiencing low income. However, not all schools are able to opt into this vital program. The challenges faced by schools that are unable to opt into CEP are growing:

**Too many children who qualify for free school meals fall through the cracks due to stigma and administrative barriers.** When students perceive school meals as only for children from low-income households, many decline to participate, despite their hunger. Literacy and language barriers can also keep many eligible families from submitting school meal applications. Additionally, school meal applications place a heavy administrative burden on school nutrition departments, often requiring valuable time and resources to be diverted away from the program to process paperwork.

**The extremely low eligibility threshold excludes many more families.** For example, a family of four living with a household income of \$57,000 a year is unable to qualify for any assistance. With Maryland's already high cost of living and current inflation rates, more families than ever are struggling to make ends meet but do not qualify for free meals.

**School systems are reporting unprecedented increases in school meal debt.** Students and families are not the only ones facing these challenges. When families struggle to pay for school meals, schools take

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<sup>1</sup> 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>.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

on the burden of those unpaid school meal fee, forcing them to spend valuable time and resources trying to find additional funds to cover their operating costs, often at the expense of general funds that would otherwise be used for educational programming and other important wraparound services.

**The solution remains clear.** At a time when historically high inflation and grocery prices are driving the need for these programs higher than ever, supporting Maryland school districts in maximizing their use of CEP is critical. SB 769 would establish \$10 million in state funding that school districts could apply for to make up the difference between a school's current CEP reimbursement rate and the 100% free-meal reimbursement rate set annually at the federal level. At this funding level, **a \$10 million state supplement could potentially allow up to 200 additional schools across the state to opt into CEP, impacting upwards of 275,000 students.** By passing and enacting SB 769, Maryland will be advancing equity, supporting students' education and health, and improving school nutrition operations.

While we look forward to a time when Maryland joins the list of states that provide school meals at no cost to ALL children, **Maryland Hunger Solutions respectfully urges a favorable report on SB 769** as an important step towards this goal by investing in our children's health and nutrition.

**Hungry children can't wait.** Thank you for your consideration.

**Table 1: Maryland school districts with non-participating CEP eligible schools**

District/Agency	# of Eligible but Non-Participating Schools*	Total Eligible but Non-Participating School Student Enrollment
Anne Arundel County	72	47,224
Calvert County	13	7,588
Carroll County	13	7,049
Cecil County	17	8,993
Charles County	21	15,273
Frederick County	31	20,215
Garrett County	12	3,491
Harford County	11	7,648
Howard County	24	17,275
Montgomery County	63	57,572
Prince George's County	63	46,573
Queen Anne's County	9	4,519
St. Mary's County	15	8,192
Talbot County	8	4,530
Washington County	27	15,664
Worcester County	4	3,268
<b>TOTALS:</b>	<b>403</b>	<b>275,074</b>

\*Based on estimates for individually eligible schools with an Identified Student Percentage (ISP) of 25%+ during SY2023-2024.