

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

I Stacey Bisnette strongly support SB 769 – Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment, which would create more hunger-free schools in Maryland by supporting high-poverty schools and school districts in providing school meals at no cost to all their students through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

As a single mother navigating a difficult divorce from an abusive spouse, I worked two jobs to support myself and my two children while also pursuing my degree. During this challenging time, the public school system became more than just an educational institution for my children—it served as a vital resource for our entire family. It provided a safe and supportive environment where my children could thrive, and the availability of school-provided breakfast and lunch was invaluable. Although working multiple jobs, my salary was unable to sufficiently meet our nutritional needs, these meals ensured that my children were well-nourished, allowing them to perform better in school. Knowing they had access to consistent meals relieved a significant burden, enabling me to focus on advancing my education and securing better employment opportunities for our future.

School meal programs can profoundly impact the lives of students, parents, and caregivers in ways that are often immeasurable. Through perseverance, I earned my bachelor's degree and went on to complete a master's in public health. Throughout my journey, I have never lost sight of the critical support we received, particularly the role school meal programs played in fostering my children's well-being and academic success. Now, as a community health advocate, I am committed to giving back to the same communities that supported my family. I strongly advocate for initiatives like the Community Eligibility Provision program to ensure that all children have the opportunity to excel in school without the added stress of food insecurity.

The Community Eligibility Provision is an important pathway to Healthy School Meals for All - supporting students' academic achievement and healthy development. The CEP's offering of school meals to all students at no cost is a vital and necessary public health investment that is critical to supporting positive educational outcomes, and is instrumental in advancing racial equity by helping to ensure that all students have the nutritional foundation they need. Every child should have access to the nutrition they need to succeed. Maryland has the ability to make Healthy School Meals for All a reality, and CEP offers an important step toward achieving that goal.

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 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. 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 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.

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. SB 769 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. I ask the committee to make a favorable report on SB 769.

Stacey Bisnette, MPH, CHES