



March 4, 2025

Ways and Means Committee
130 Taylor House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Support for HB 1469 – For Our Kids Act

Dear Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and Honorable Members of the Ways and Means Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), your food and health watchdog. My name is Joelle Johnson, and I am a Deputy Director at CSPI and a mother of two young children. **I am writing to express CSPI's strong support for HB 1469 the For Our Kids Act.** The For Our Kids Act would create a necessary dedicated funding stream for healthy school meal in Maryland by levying a statewide tax on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs). **The legislation has the potential double benefit of ensuring every student receives healthy school meals and reducing consumption of disease-causing SSBs.** Further, if HB 1469 passes, Maryland would become the first state in the country to adopt a statewide SSB tax.

CSPI is a fierce defender of science-based nutrition policies and has advocated for healthier school meals for decades. CSPI helped pass the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which led to sweeping improvements in school meal nutrition. Following the Trump administration's 2018 rule that weakened school nutrition standards, CSPI sued the Administration and won, ultimately getting the rule revoked. CSPI also supports policy that gives all students access to healthy meals through involvement in about a dozen statewide healthy school meals for all campaigns.

There are three key reasons why funding healthy school meals for all is a critical public health issue.

Expanding Access to Healthy School Meals Will Provide Economic Support for Families

Students qualify for free school meals if their household income is at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level, or through participation in certain federal assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.ⁱ However, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, federal funds and waivers allowed students nationwide to receive free breakfast and lunch, regardless of household income.^{ii,iii} Despite a strong positive response from school districts, families, and public health and education advocates, Congress allowed this provision to expire in summer 2022.^{iv} In response, 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.^v

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,^{vi} and the Maryland Cares for Kids Act of 2018 ensures any child eligible for free or reduced-price meals receives a free meal.^{vii} 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. **Inflation is hurting families' budgets and many cannot shoulder the costs of school meals.** For families who do qualify for free meals, stigma and shame associated with qualifying prevent some

students from participating.^{viii} Nowhere else during the school day do we require proof of income like we do in the cafeteria. Schools provide books and transportation to all students regardless of family income. School meals, which are an invaluable opportunity to instill healthy eating habits for life, and support student learning, should be treated no differently.^{ix}

Expanding Access to Healthy 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, diet quality, food security, and academic performance.^x Research shows that in 2017-2018, school food was the highest-quality source of food for kids.^{xi}

Expanding Access to Healthy School Meals Can Advance Equity

Healthy school meals for all remove stigma for children participating in the program and provide equitable access to nutritious meals. A recent report found that when all students have access to free meals, kids who previously were income-eligible for free- or reduced-priced meals felt safer inside the school.^{xii} Healthy school meals for all ensure that children who might be on the edges of eligibility, or 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.

Taxing sugary drinks to fund healthy school meals is a win-win for Maryland. SSBs are the number one source of added sugars in our diet, and are linked to increased risk of chronic and deadly diet-related diseases.^{xiii} Research shows that SSB taxes are effective at reducing sales of sugary beverages^{xiv} and raising millions of dollars^{xv} for community health priorities with no impact on jobs^{xvi}. One potential advantage of a statewide SSB tax is that, compared to a local tax, it would be expected to reduce any tendency of residents to shop for SSBs in adjacent areas.

No child deserves to be hungry at school. Taxing sugary beverages, which provide no nutritional value and are a leading driver of chronic disease in this country, to pay for this important program is the right thing to do. Thank you.

Sincerely,



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ⁱ U.S. Department of Agriculture. *School Meals Model Application*. December 6, 2024. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/schoolmeals/model-application#:~:text=Eligibility,or%20district%20for%20more%20information>. Accessed February 25, 2025.

ⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Child Nutrition COVID-19 Waivers*. November 8, 2022. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster-assistance/child-nutrition-covid-19-waivers#:~:text=Waiver%20to%20Allow%20Fiscal%20Action,7%207%2F6%2F22>). Accessed December 10, 2024.

ⁱⁱⁱ Families First Coronavirus Response Act. P.L. 116-127 § 2202, 134 Stat. 185.

^{iv} Keep Kids Fed Act of 2022. P.L. 117-158.

^v Food Research and Action Center. *Raise Your Hand for Healthy School Meals for All*. November 2023. [Healthy School Meals for All \(frac.org\)](https://www.frac.org). Accessed December 10, 2024.

^{vi} 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.

^{vii} Maryland Cares for Kids Act. H.B. 315. 2018.

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https://www.childnourishlab.org/files/ugd/383bcd_45ee5fed8e224ffd8639f0f498086e31.pdf. Accessed December 10, 2024.
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- x 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.
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- xiii 2025 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee. 2024. *Scientific Report of the 2025 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee: Advisory Report to the Secretary of Health and Human Services and Secretary of Agriculture*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://doi.org/10.52570/DGAC2025>
- xiv Kaplan S, White JS, Madsen KA, et al. Evaluation of Changes in Prices and Purchases Following Implementation of Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Taxes Across the US. *JAMA Health Forum*. 2024;5(1):e234737.
- xv Krieger J, Magee K, Hennings T, Schoof J, Madsen KA. How sugar-sweetened beverage tax revenues are being used in the United States. *Prev Med Rep*. 2021;23:101388.
- xvi Marinello S, Leider J, Pugach O, Powell LM. The Impact of the Philadelphia Beverage Tax on Employment: A Synthetic Control Analysis. *Econ Hum Biol*. 2021;40:100939.