



SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENT FOR SB 311
Education – The Blueprint for Maryland’s Future – Revisions
House Appropriations Committee
April 2, 2025
POVERTY FREE MARYLAND

Voting Member Agencies:

Anne Arundel County Food Bank
Baltimore Jewish Council
CASH Campaign of Maryland
Catholic Charities
Family League of Baltimore
Laurel Advocacy & Referral Services, Inc.
Maryland Center on Economic Policy
Maryland Family Network
Maryland Food Bank
Maryland Hunger Solutions
Poverty Free Maryland

Poverty Free Maryland supports SB 311 with the amendments adopted to the House version of the bill - to guide the development of new and more accurate poverty data collection methods for determining State Compensatory Education Funding.

As written, SB 311 extends a current hold-harmless provision for schools implementing the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), allowing them to continue using previously collected free and reduced-price meal (FARMS) data when calculating State Compensatory Education Funding. This protection was first established in Maryland through the Hunger-Free Schools Act of 2015 to remove a major barrier to early CEP adoption.

CEP is one of the most effective strategies we have for removing stigma, eliminating barriers, and ensuring every child can reliably access meals at school. Research consistently shows that CEP not only improves access to school meals but also reduces household food insecurity. As Maryland faces a deepening affordability crisis driven by stagnant wages, rising costs of living, and diminishing federal supports, school meals have become an essential stabilizing force for families with children. Providing meals at no cost through CEP helps reduce food insecurity, ease household financial strain, and ensure that students receive the nutrition they need to learn, grow, and thrive.

When schools opt into CEP, they no longer collect FARMS applications. Instead, they rely on direct certification, a process that identifies students eligible for free school meals through data matching programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Medicaid, as well as through identification of students experiencing homelessness, in foster care, migrant, or enrolled in Head Start.

Because many programs outside of the school nutrition programs, including education funding formulas, have historically adopted the use

*Founded in 2025 through the merger of Welfare Advocates (established in 1979) and Marylanders Against Poverty (established in 1988), **Poverty Free Maryland** is a coalition of service providers, faith groups, and other organizations working together to exchange information, educate decisionmakers, and advocate for statewide public policies and programs necessary to address the underlying systemic causes of poverty and ensure that low-income Marylanders are provided with low- and no-barrier access to all resources needed to thrive and build a better life for the future.*

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of FARMs data, the transition to direct certification when schools implement CEP can create challenges. Maryland's 2015 Hunger-Free Schools Act helped to address this by allowing CEP schools to continue using previously collected FARMs data for State Compensatory Education Funding. Over the past 10 years, this hold-harmless provision has enabled more than 700 schools to adopt CEP, ensuring over 390,000 students have access to free school meals. Without this protection, many schools—particularly those serving communities with the highest poverty—would not have been able to operate a universal school meals program through CEP.

The expiration of the hold-harmless provision outlined in SB 311 will force Maryland's CEP schools to choose between maintaining CEP or protecting essential state education funding, making it impossible for some schools and districts to continue serving school meals at no cost to their students. On top of this, recent cuts to SNAP and Medicaid in the federal H.R. 1 budget bill threaten to erode the data used for direct certification. As participation in federal safety net programs declines due to federal policy changes, schools will see significant undercounts of students experiencing poverty—further destabilizing funding and undermining CEP.

SB 311 provides a necessary one-year extension of the hold-harmless provision to prevent immediate harm. However, an accurate method for measuring poverty that reflects the realities families face, regardless of fluctuation in reliability of federal program data, is also needed. As such, we strongly urge the committee to adopt the amendment from Strong Schools Maryland to ensure the state develops a method for stabilizing Maryland's school poverty measures.

SB 311, paired with the proposed amendment, will allow CEP schools to continue providing free meals now while we work to build a long-term, equitable, and sustainable solution for the future.

Thank you for your consideration.

Poverty Free Maryland envisions a Maryland without poverty, and a future where all Marylanders have the support and economic stability that's needed to thrive.