

FAVORABLE
House Bill 704
Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program - Establishment

House Appropriations Committee
House Ways & Means Committee
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The Maryland State Education Association supports House Bill 704, which would establish the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Expansion Program to provide funding to schools that participate in the federal community eligibility provision for child nutrition programs. Beginning in fiscal year 2028 and each year thereafter, the Governor would be required to include \$10,000,000 in the annual budget bill for the program, which would bridge gaps in federal funding sources for schools and ensure that students can reliably access free school meals.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland's public schools, teaching and preparing our almost 900,000 students for the careers and jobs of the future. MSEA also represents 44 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3-million-member National Education Association (NEA).

Educators know well that school meals are often the primary source of nutritious meals for our students facing food insecurity. Children with inconsistent access to nutrition face real and lasting health impacts on their physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development, with consequences for their academic and behavioral outcomes.

This bill accounts for situations in which schools receive less federal funding through the CEP because they have fewer students identified as eligible for free meals. However, we know that identification rates are often not fully reflective of need within a school, as administrative barriers and delays in reporting can result in an undercount of students who would qualify for free meals. The program in this bill would ensure consistent funding for participating schools and therefore enhance schools' ability to provide all students with adequate nutrition. This effort complements the aims of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future and builds on years of work to provide targeted resources to students living in concentrated poverty.

We urge the committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 704.