

HB 704 - FAV

Greetings Chairman Barnes, Vice Chairwoman Kaiser, and members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Paige Racine. I am a student at the University of Maryland, College Park and an intern here at the Maryland General Assembly. While I am here in a personal capacity to express my strong support for HB 704 and to share my experience as a graduate of Cecil County public schools, in the interest of full transparency I am currently interning for Delegate Palakovich Carr—her work on this issue was a big reason why I was interested in working for her office.

From my first year of middle school to my final year of high school, I was in the same building with most of the same people, but my junior year was unique in two respects: it was the first time my school was enrolled in the CEP Program, and it was the first year since the 6th grade that one of my best friends was able to eat lunch at school.

Despite easily qualifying, his parents never filled out the necessary forms for free lunch, and as a result, the only way he was able to have anything to eat was to walk the cafeteria and ask around to see if anybody had leftovers they were willing to give him. He tried to play it off—it was routine for him to stand up and make a joke about panhandling before leaving our table to go scrounge for food—but we went to a very small school, and it was easy to see that it was embarrassing for everyone to know his family couldn't afford to buy lunch.

His experience was not unique—I distinctly remember noticing how many more of my peers were eating breakfast and lunch when it became available to all students at no cost. And while I typically brought my own lunch to school, if I had forgotten my food from home I was able to quickly receive a school lunch without having to worry about the amount of money in my account, where ordinarily I would either have to call home and ask my parents to deposit money in my account, or just go hungry.

I want to reiterate just how quick and simple the CEP program made receiving school meals. People received their lunches much quicker without having to worry about prices and insufficient account balances, and free breakfast meant those who had a late lunch period wouldn't have to wait until 1 p.m. for their first meal. And because everyone had access to the same meal, there was no stigma for those who qualified for free and reduced price lunches, and parents did not have to fill out invasive forms so that their children were able to eat with their peers.

School is difficult enough on its own—Maryland students do not need hunger as an additional obstacle to successful learning. HB 704 will allow students to focus more on their academics and less on where their next meal will come from. Thank you for the opportunity to express my strong support for HB 704, and I once again urge you to support this essential

legislation.