

SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENT FOR SB 311

Education – The Blueprint for Maryland's Future – Revisions

House Appropriations Committee

April 02, 2026

Maryland Hunger Solutions supports SB 311, which extends the timeline for a hold harmless provision that defines the methods available for schools using the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) to determine the number of students used to calculate State Compensatory Education Funding. **We also support the addition of amendments to match the language included in the House version of this bill, HB 490**, which extends the hold harmless provision an additional year and adds guidance for determining future poverty data collection methods, which would offer a longer-term solution to the challenges being experienced by these schools.

As Marylanders continue to struggle against stagnant wages, diminishing government supports, and rising costs of living, the federal child nutrition programs, in particular the school meal programs, have become more important than ever to help families stretch their limited resources and ensure their children have the nutrition they need to thrive in and out of school. Unfortunately, recent cuts to SNAP and Medicaid passed in the federal H.R. 1 budget bill are threatening the support systems that so many Maryland families rely on to maintain their health and keep food on the table.

H.R. 1 made deep cuts to SNAP and Medicaid by slashing benefits, expanding harsh work requirements, eliminating eligibility for many humanitarian immigrants, capping future benefit increases, and shifting unprecedented new costs to states. These changes will increase hunger and push more struggling families into poverty. They will also have ripple effects on other programs, such as school, summer, and afterschool meal programs, WIC, SUN Bucks, and state education funding, by impacting the way we are able to measure poverty in schools and the reliability of those measurements.

Children whose households participate in SNAP and Medicaid are directly certified for free school meals. Direct certification leverages data and technology to automatically link children in SNAP households with free school meals, eliminating the need for a school meal application. These direct certification rates are the primary basis for determining which schools can utilize the CEP to offer free meals to all students. By making school meals free for all students, CEP supports healthier students, better academic outcomes, and the elimination of childhood hunger.

Once a school opts into CEP, the need for collecting school meal applications is eliminated, making direct certification data the only poverty measure collected by the school's nutrition department. In the past, the loss of school meal application data was a major barrier for schools wanting to adopt CEP due to the link between school meal application data and state education funding level determinations. However, in 2015 the Maryland General Assembly passed a piece of legislation, the Hunger-Free Schools Act, which allowed school districts to be held harmless with regards to qualifying for State

Compensatory Education Funding based on previous Free and Reduced-Price Meals data collected prior to CEP implementation.

This hold-harmless provision from 2015 has been in effect for over 10 years, allowing Maryland's CEP adoption to grow to over 700 schools, resulting in over 390,000 students across the state having access to school breakfast and school lunch at no cost. Without this hold-harmless provision, many of our CEP schools and school districts would not have been able to opt into CEP out of fear of losing critical education funding.

Unfortunately, this hold-harmless provision is set to expire this year. Combined with the expected loss in reliable data from federal programs due to recent H.R. 1 cuts, the loss of this provision would likely cause an extreme undercounting of students experiencing poverty, forcing schools to reconsider their CEP status in order to maintain their education funding levels.

SB 311 helps to remedy this challenge by including an extension of the hold-harmless provision for one fiscal year, until SY 2027. While this is a critical step towards ensuring that CEP schools continue to receive the resources needed to support all Maryland students, it does not provide a long-term solution to this on-going issue.

That is why we support SB 311 and respectfully urge the committee to adopt the language included in the House version of this bill, HB 490, which includes an additional year for the hold harmless extension and outlines guidance for the state to develop new methods for measuring poverty in schools that will help fill the gaps in our current systems.

We applaud the Maryland General Assembly for previously taking important steps to create flexibility in the state code to enable schools to eliminate school meal applications through implementation of the CEP, without the fear of losing state education funding. We support SB 311 to create more needed changes which will allow schools to move forward now and recommend the inclusion of additional language to ensure a long-term solution is developed hastily.

Thank you for your consideration.