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**Testimony in Support of HB 704  
Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program - Establishment**

One in six children in Maryland face hunger daily; that's 221,000 kids in total.<sup>1</sup> To put that into perspective, that's more children than the populations of six Maryland counties combined. HB 704 establishes the Community Eligibility Provision Expansion program to provide free breakfast and lunch to school students. Maryland is making historic investments in public education through the Blueprint for Maryland's Future; however, students cannot learn if they are hungry.

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a federal program that allows high-poverty schools to serve free breakfast and lunch to all students. In Maryland, 709 schools participate, reaching more than 393,000 students across the state. Students in CEP schools are approximately three times less likely to experience food insecurity compared to those in eligible schools that do not participate in the program.<sup>2</sup> Research has shown other benefits, including better academic performance, reduced stigma for students, and improved staff morale.<sup>3</sup>

Many Maryland schools serve high poverty student populations but do not qualify for full federal reimbursement under CEP. HB 704's \$10 million annual investment bridges this gap, allowing MSDE to provide supplemental funding that covers the difference between federal reimbursement and the actual costs of meals.

## **Background**

The General Assembly has taken several steps to expand access to free and reduced-price meals. In the late 1990s, Maryland passed the Maryland Meals for Achievement Program to provide state funding to supplement federal meal reimbursements for high-poverty schools; students in hundreds of schools now benefit. In 2018, Maryland passed the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/maryland#>

<sup>2</sup> Gross, S.M., et al. (2019). Household food security status of families with children attending schools that participate in the community eligibility provision (CEP) and those with children attending schools that are CEP-eligible, but not participating. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*.

<sup>3</sup> Hecht, A., et al. (2021). Universal free school meals through the Community Eligibility Provision: Maryland food service provider perspectives. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Management Systems, and Community Development* (pp. 1–22critical)

Maryland Cares for Kids Act, which phased out the reduced-price copay, making school meals free for thousands of additional low-income students.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress authorized waivers to make school meals free for all children in all schools. That federal policy expired at the end of the 2022-2023 school year. Eight states picked up where Congress left off and are providing free school meals for all students.<sup>4</sup>

### **New Urgency Because of Federal Cuts**

Recent federal policy changes have created urgent threats to school meal programs.

Federal cuts to SNAP and Medicaid are dismantling the direct certification system that determines CEP eligibility. The Urban Institute estimates that approximately 369,000 Maryland families will lose some or all SNAP benefits.<sup>5</sup> According to the Maryland Department of Health, more than 130,000 Marylanders are projected to lose Medicaid coverage.<sup>6</sup>

When families lose SNAP or Medicaid benefits, their children lose direct certification for free meals. Even though families have not become less poor in reality, they no longer count towards the school's CEP eligibility. As the percentage of a school's CEP eligible population drops, federal reimbursement rates for meals also drops. As a result, many Maryland schools participating in CEP may be forced to drop out of the program.

In addition, federal cuts to funding for school nutrition equipment grants, farm to table, and related fresh produce programs are further squeezing school nutrition budgets. The elimination of funding for the SNAP-Ed program that provided training, technical assistance, and nutrition education resources to school districts is also harming efforts to feed our students healthy school meals.

Without the \$10 million investment proposed in this bill, some Maryland schools will be forced to stop providing free meals to all students. Maryland's most vulnerable families will face a double burden: losing food assistance at home while their children simultaneously lose free school meals.

The funding in this bill was originally intended to expand the free school meals program—to bring 200 additional schools into the program and to feed 90,000 additional students. Regrettably, the funding may now be needed to preserve current school feeding programs because of loss of federal actions.

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<sup>4</sup> California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont.

<sup>5</sup> [How the Senate Budget Reconciliation SNAP Proposals Will Affect Families in Every US State](#)

<sup>6</sup> [OBBBA One-Pager\\_7.11.25.pdf](#)