



**Testimony in SUPPORT of**  
**House Bill 704: Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment**  
**House Appropriations and Ways and Means Committee**

**Position: Support**  
February 17, 2026

At Strong Schools Maryland, we work to support the faithful implementation and full funding of the promises legislated through the landmark Blueprint for Maryland's Future. The Blueprint envisions a public education system where all students can feel safe and supported to learn and thrive in their school community. It was designed to specifically address systemic inequities that disproportionately impact historically marginalized communities. As a result, **Strong Schools Maryland offers favorable testimony in support of HB 704 – Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment** which aims to support hunger-free schools in Maryland by providing state funding to high-poverty schools and school districts using the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) to provide school meals to all students at no cost.

School meals play an important role in reducing childhood hunger and ensuring that students are ready to learn. We know that food security is necessary for children's psychological well being, physical health, and academic ability as hunger negatively impacts concentration, memory, and mood. However, too many children miss out on the benefits of school meals because of the current tiered payment structure, which requires a family of four to earn less than \$59,500 annually to qualify for no-cost meals.

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a federal program that allows high-poverty schools to serve free breakfast and lunch to *all* students, including in over 700 Maryland schools. Research has shown that CEP schools experience a range of benefits, including: increased meal participation, reduced stigma for students, elimination of school meal debt, and improved staff morale<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, students in CEP schools are approximately three times less likely to experience food insecurity compared to those in eligible schools that do not participate<sup>2</sup>. CEP has revolutionized children's access to healthy school meals by eliminating stigma for students, reducing barriers of cost and paperwork for families, and streamlining food service operations.

Despite these benefits, not all schools are able to use CEP because of limitations in the current federal reimbursement structure. Moreover, recent cuts to SNAP and Medicaid at the federal level threaten to reduce the number of students who are able to be directly certified for free school meals, which will make it harder for schools and districts to meet the minimum CEP eligibility threshold and cause federal reimbursements to become even more inadequate to maintain operations. Establishing a \$10 million state

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<sup>1</sup> Hecht, A., Neff, R., Kelley, T., & Pollack Porter, K. (2021). Universal free schools meals through the Community Eligibility Provision: Maryland food service provider perspectives. In *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* (pp. 1–22). Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2021.102.033>.

<sup>2</sup> Gross, S.M., Kelley, T.L., Augustyn, M., Wilson, M.J., Bassarab, K., and Palmer, A. (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*. 2019 October; doi: 10.1080/19320248.2019.1679318.

CEP supplement fund as outlined in this bill would help make the program financially sustainable for more schools across the state as well as protect the financial sustainability of the program in existing CEP schools that are at risk of decreased federal reimbursements due to the impacts of H.R. 1.

With the cost of living rising and more families struggling to meet basic needs, expanding the number of CEP schools in Maryland is crucial to meeting students' needs. HB 704 would be an important stepping stone in Maryland's journey towards helping to reduce hunger, improve student health and academic performance, ease the financial burden on families already facing challenges, and achieve the vision of the Blueprint. Hungry kids can't wait.

**For these reasons, Strong Schools Maryland urges the House Appropriations and Ways and Means Committee to issue a favorable report on HB 704.**

**Please contact Kenzie Funk at [kenzie@strongschoolsmaryland.org](mailto:kenzie@strongschoolsmaryland.org) for additional questions.**