



February 11th, 2026

Testimony of Laura Hale
American Heart Association

Favorable HB 704 Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment

Dear Chair Barnes, Vice Chair Kaiser, and Honorable Members of the Appropriations Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before the committee today. The American Heart Association extends its strong support for HB 704 Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment. My name is Laura Hale and I am the Director of Government Relations for the American Heart Association.

For children to succeed in school, it is essential that they have a healthy lunch and a healthy breakfast. This legislation will expand Healthy School Meals for All to many schools across the state. This is the beginning of an important program.

A hungry child cannot learn. We as a state have set forth our priorities on where we will fund and the great wisdom has been made to push our children for academic achievement. We have set forth the task of funding a variety of things to make that better, but the space we currently lag behind is in the feeding of our children. Children cannot succeed without proper nutrition, and we know that for most children they receive up to half of their daily calories from school meals¹. Research has also found that school meals are the healthiest meals that children receive each day². During the pandemic we provided breakfast and lunch to all children, no questions asked, and it made a difference for families and kids. Now that the federal funding is gone, many children are falling through the cracks. Whether their parents make slightly too much money to qualify, whether forms are not filled out, or because of the stigma³ of being labeled “the poor kid” children are not eating. We have the opportunity to change all of that with this legislation. We know this legislation works, a meta-analysis published by the NIH noted that when schools offered healthy school meals for all they, “found positive associations with diet quality, food security, and academic performance⁴.” This meta-analysis also outlines positive association in BMI and possibly improves in household income particularly for low-income families⁵.

Research out of Johns Hopkins showed how much offering free school meals for all made a difference, not only for children, but also for their families. As families who participated in school meals were able to stave off food insecurity or not become more food insecure. It was a key protective factor in making sure

¹ [School Nutrition Environment | Healthy Schools | CDC](#)

² [Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018 | Lifestyle Behaviors | JAMA Network Open | JAMA Network](#)

³ [Participation in the National School Lunch Program: Importance of School-Level and Neighborhood Contextual Factors - Mirtcheva - 2009 - Journal of School Health - Wiley Online Library](#)

⁴ [Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)

⁵ [Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)

Maryland families did not drop deeper into poverty or our middle-class families to not fall into poverty⁶. We can choose to leave no one behind, by investing and providing healthy school meals for all.

The American Heart Association urges a favorable report on House Bill 704.

⁶ [Pre-pandemic to early-pandemic changes in risk of household food insecurity among Maryland families with children - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)