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BILL: HB 704
TITLE: Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment
DATE: February 17, 2026
POSITION: Favorable
COMMITTEE: House Appropriations Committee
CONTACT: Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director

The Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM), on behalf of all twenty-four Maryland local school superintendents, **supports** House Bill 704.

This legislation establishes the Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program in the State Department of Education to provide funding to eligible schools that participate in the federal community eligibility provision of the child nutrition programs; requiring schools that opt out of the Community Eligibility Provision of the Child Nutrition Program report their reasons for not participating; and, requiring the Governor in fiscal year 2028 and succeeding years to include \$10,000,000 in the annual budget bill for the Program.

Based on our experience during the COVID-19 pandemic - when local school systems successfully delivered millions of meals to students and families under extraordinary circumstances - we are confident that all twenty-four local school systems can implement an ambitious universal meals expansion program effectively and efficiently. Maryland school systems have demonstrated both the operational capacity and commitment to ensure that no child goes hungry during the school day. Unfortunately, funding has not been available to provide this impactful opportunity for all schools.

The research on universal free meals is extensive and consistently confirms their positive impact on student achievement, both academically and behaviorally. Students who participate in school meal programs are more likely to consume nutritious foods such as fruits, vegetables, and milk, contributing to healthier eating habits and reductions in childhood obesity.

Eliminating the transaction of paying for meals also allows students more time to eat and removes stigma or administrative barriers that can discourage participation. Importantly, universal access removes the margin of error in identifying food-insecure students that often exists under traditional application-based systems. Families benefit as well; reducing the cost of providing two meals a day for children eases financial strain, particularly for working families navigating rising living costs.

Research consistently demonstrates that a well-fed student is better positioned to succeed – they are more attentive in class, better prepared for assessments, and more fully engaged in the school environment. Participation in free meal programs is associated with fewer absences, improved attendance, reduced tardiness, fewer behavioral incidents, and a more positive overall school climate.

While we strongly support the establishment of this program, we respectfully note that the \$10 million annual appropriation will not fully meet the statewide need. Moreover, the reporting provisions in the bill will likely confirm what we already know - participation in federal CEP has lagged in Maryland, not because districts are unwilling, but because they must carefully weigh significant fiscal risks.

Under the current framework, districts entering or expanding CEP must discontinue the use of traditional federal meal application forms. In the absence of a new, reliable statewide methodology for counting students in poverty - as required under the Blueprint for Maryland's Future but not yet created by the Department - districts face uncertainty. Compensatory Education funding counts remain heavily dependent on poverty measures, and CEP calculations alone do not always capture an accurate or complete picture of need. School systems must therefore balance the benefits of universal meals against potential losses in compensatory education funding tied to incomplete data.

Until Maryland adopts a consistent and reliable alternative poverty-counting methodology, participation in new CEP schools or districts will likely remain cautious.

For that reason, we believe the long-term success of this legislation is closely tied to the State's development of a more accurate and equitable method for measuring student poverty. A refined methodology would allow resources to be targeted to students and schools with the greatest need, provide local systems with the confidence to expand CEP participation, and generate more accurate data to support funding decisions.

Such an approach would also assist in identifying additional community schools - a major priority under the Blueprint - and could improve the calculation and allocation of federal Title I funds at both the school and district levels. By aligning meal access, poverty measurement, and funding distribution, Maryland would advance equity in a meaningful and data-driven way.

PSSAM strongly supports this legislation and the State's commitment to expanding access to free school meals. We encourage continued attention to funding sufficiency and the development of a comprehensive poverty-counting methodology to ensure that this investment delivers maximum impact for Maryland's students. Ensuring that students are consistently well-fed is not only a matter of compassion - it is foundational to academic success and educational equity.

For these reasons, we respectfully request a **favorable report** on HB 704.