



Mission: To improve public health in Maryland through education and advocacy **Vision:** Healthy Marylanders living in Healthy Communities

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 586
SB0586: Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment
Committee: Budget and Taxation;
Education, Energy, and the Environment
By: Maryland Public Health Association (MdpHA)
Hearing Date: February 25, 2026**

Chair Guzzone, Vice-Chair Rosapepe, and members of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee and the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to testify in favor of SB586, which would establish 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.

Expanding this program ensures that more students in high-need schools have access to free school meals without the administrative barriers of individual applications.¹

Food insecurity is a significant social determinant of health that directly impacts academic performance, cognitive development, and long-term health outcomes.¹ Students experiencing hunger are more likely to struggle with concentration, behavioral challenges, and absenteeism.² Access to nutritious meals improves test performance, attendance, and graduation rates while reducing stigma associated with free meal eligibility.²

From a public health and economic perspective, school meal programs are among the most effective upstream interventions available.³ Every dollar invested in school nutrition programs generates returns in improved academic achievement, reduced healthcare costs, and enhanced long-term productivity. Expanding the Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program simplifies access, increases participation, and ensures that children in high-poverty communities receive consistent nutrition.⁴

¹ Gundersen, C., & Ziliak, J. P. (2015). Food insecurity and health outcomes. *Health Affairs*, 34(11), 1830–1839. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2015.0645>

² U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2023). *Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) resource center*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov>

³ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2022). *Community eligibility improves student nutrition and reduces stigma*. <https://www.cbpp.org>

⁴ United States Department of Agriculture. (2019). *The relationship between food insecurity and children's academic outcomes*. <https://www.ers.usda.gov>

By reducing administrative burdens and expanding meal access, SB0586 advances educational equity and strengthens Maryland's commitment to supporting the whole child. The Maryland Public Health Association respectfully urges a favorable report.

The Maryland Public Health Association (MdPHA) is a nonprofit, statewide organization of public health professionals dedicated to improving the lives of all Marylanders through education, advocacy, and collaboration. We support public policies consistent with our vision of healthy Marylanders living in healthy, equitable, communities. MdPHA is the state affiliate of the American Public Health Association, a nearly 145-year-old professional organization dedicated to improving population health and reducing the health disparities that plague our state and our nation.

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