



February 23, 2026

**2025 SESSION SUPPORT TESTIMONY**  
**SB 586: Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program -**  
**Establishment**

**BILL:** SB 586: Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program - Establishment

**COMMITTEE:** Senate Budget and Taxation & Education, Energy, and the Environment

**POSITION:** Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 586

**ANALYSIS:** Establishing 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 to include certain information in a certain report; and requiring the Governor in fiscal year 2028 and succeeding years to include \$10,000,000 in the annual budget bill for the Program.

Dear Chair Guzzone and Chair Feldman, and Members of the Budget and Taxation & Education, Energy, and the Environment Committees:

The Montgomery County Food Council strongly supports SB 586 – 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 are essential to reducing childhood hunger and ensuring students are nourished and ready to learn. Yet many families are shut out by the current tiered payment structure, which limits free meal eligibility to families of four earning less than \$59,500 annually. In Montgomery County, this threshold falls far below the reality of household expenses. According to the 2023 Self-Sufficiency Standard, a family of four with one school-age child and one preschooler needs \$116,864 per year to meet basic needs—nearly double the income limit for free meals<sup>1</sup>.

During the 2025–2026 school year, 60 Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) sites are participating in CEP, providing free breakfast and lunch to more than 35,000 students each day. Although MCPS may not benefit significantly from this specific funding expansion—due to higher concentrations of poverty in other jurisdictions—we strongly support this proposal as an important step toward reaching thousands of additional students in Montgomery County and across the state who are currently unable to access this benefit. Ultimately, this effort moves Maryland closer to the goal of providing free meals to all students statewide.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/OCA/CommunityAction/Self-SufficiencyStandard.html>



The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a proven solution to this issue. This federal program allows high-poverty schools to serve free breakfast and lunch to all students, including in over 700 Maryland schools – reaching over 390,000 students across the state. 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>2</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>3</sup>.

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 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 would be a game-changer for many students and their families. SB 586 would be an important stepping stone in Maryland’s journey towards Healthy School Meals for All, helping to reduce hunger, improve student health and academic performance, and ease the financial burden on families already facing challenges. Hungry kids can’t wait. Now is the time for Maryland to make this critical investment to ensure more schools across the state are able to remain hunger-free!

Thank you for your consideration. **We ask the committee to make a favorable report on SB 586.**

*The Montgomery County Food Council is a nonprofit organization that serves as the primary connection point for businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, and residents around food system issues in our County. We bring together over 2,000 local and regional partners in community-wide education, advocacy, and capacity building initiatives. Our work cultivates a more resilient, sustainable, and equitable local food system by enhancing food access for the over 100,000 at risk for hunger, expanding food education opportunities for all residents, supporting our County’s farms and food and beverage businesses, and addressing the impact of local food production, distribution, consumption and recycling on our natural resources.*

For more information, please contact Annmarie Hart-Bookbinder, Director of Food Security Programs, at [annmarie@mocofoodcouncil.org](mailto:annmarie@mocofoodcouncil.org).

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<sup>2</sup> Hecht, A., Neff, R., Kelley, T., & Pollack Porter, K. (2021). Universal free school 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>3</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.

