



February 23rd, 2026

RE: Written Testimony in Support of SB 586, Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. I am submitting testimony on behalf of the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a science-based consumer advocacy organization and member of the [Healthy School Meals for All Maryland Coalition](#). I am also a Prince George's County, Maryland resident and a mother of two young children, one of whom will start Kindergarten in the fall through Prince George's County Public Schools. I would like to take this opportunity to express strong support for expanding access to free school meals for more Maryland students, as proposed in SB 586. CSPI is a fierce defendant of science-based nutrition standards for school meals and has worked on improving school food for decades. Prior to our involvement in the passage of the federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which led to sweeping improvements in school nutrition, CSPI worked with state and local advocates to pass innovative. Following the Trump administration's 2018 rule that weakened school nutrition standards, CSPI sued the Administration and won, ultimately getting their rule overturned. CSPI also supports national and statewide efforts to protect and expand access to free meals to all students.

CSPI urges the committee to make a favorable report on SB 586. SB 586 aims to expand access to school meals and increase the number of hunger-free schools in Maryland by making the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) financially viable to eligible schools. CEP is an existing federal provision that allows high-poverty schools and districts to provide school meals at no cost to all students. Due to CEP's reimbursement structure, schools with higher poverty rates are more likely to participate in CEP while schools on the lower end of the eligibility threshold may struggle without additional financial assistance.

Expanding CEP Uptake Will Provide Needed Economic Support for Families

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which was signed into law in 2025, will threaten access to school meals and hurt Maryland families. If fewer students are directly certified for free school meals through SNAP or Medicaid, it will become harder for schools and districts to meet the minimum threshold for becoming CEP-eligible, and, if they are eligible, for making CEP financially viable. The funding in SB 586 can be used to maintain CEP schools in Maryland even if lower direct certification rates threaten the financial sustainability of the federal reimbursement formula.

Maryland has already recognized the critical role school meals play. The Maryland Meals for Achievement program allows eligible schools to offer free breakfast in the classroom,ⁱ and the Maryland Cares for Kids Act of 2018 ensures any child eligible for free or reduced-price meals receives a free meal.ⁱⁱ However, even with these policies, current eligibility criteria leave far too many Maryland children behind, including those from lower and middle-class families struggling to make ends meet. This school year, for a student to receive free meals in Maryland, their household income cannot exceed \$41,795 annually for a family of four. Inflation is hurting families' budgets, and many cannot shoulder the cost of school meals. For those who do qualify for free meals, stigma and shame associated with qualifying prevent students from participating.ⁱⁱⁱ Nowhere else during the school day do we require proof of family income like we do in the cafeteria. For example, schools willingly provide books and transportation regardless of family income. School meals, which are an invaluable opportunity to instill healthy eating habits for life, and critical for ensuring that children are ready to learn, should be treated no differently.

Expanding Access to School Meals Will Promote Nutrition, Food Security, and Academic Performance

A systematic review examining free school meals for all policies found that they are positively associated with school meal participation, and in many cases, are positively associated with diet quality, food security, and academic performance.^{iv} Research shows that in 2017-2018, food consumed at school was the highest quality source of food for kids – followed by grocery stores, other sources, worksites, and restaurants.^v

Expanding Access to School Meals Can Advance Equity

Expanding access to school meals through CEP can remove stigma for children participating in the program and provide equitable access to healthy meals. A recent report found that when all students have access to free meals, perceptions of bullying and fighting decrease outside of school and kids that previously were income-eligible for free- or reduced-priced meals felt safer inside the school, including the cafeteria.^{vi} Expanding access to school meals will help ensure that children who might be on the edges of eligibility, or children who are experiencing homelessness, are undocumented, have caregivers who may struggle with administrative paperwork, or are in foster care do not fall through the cracks.

No child deserves to be hungry at school. Now is the time for Maryland to make this critical investment in school meals to ensure the health and wellbeing of all children.

As such, I thank you for your consideration and urge a favorable report on SB 586.



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ⁱ Maryland Hunger Solutions. Maryland Meals for Achievement. 2020. <https://www.mdhungersolutions.org/federal-nutrition-programs/school-breakfast-program-sbp/maryland-meals-for-achievement/>. Accessed February 9, 2026.

ⁱⁱ Maryland Cares for Kids Act. H.B. 315. 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cohen J et al. Impact of Massachusetts' Healthy School Meals for All Policy on Families. Nourish Lab at the Center for Health Inclusion, Research and Practice. June 2023. https://www.childnourishlab.org/_files/ugd/383bcd_45ee5fed8e224ffd8639f0f498086e31.pdf. Accessed February 9, 2026.

^{iv} Cohen J, et al. Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review. *Nutrients*. 2021; 13(3):911.

^v Liu J, et al. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021;4(4):e215262.

^{vi} Gutierrez E. The Effect of Universal Free Meals on Student Perceptions of School Climate: Evidence from New York City. Pages 22, 24. June 2021. EdWorkingPaper: 21-430. Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University.