

# **Poverty Free Maryland\_Support for SB586 - CEP Expa**

Uploaded by: Abby Snyder, Co-Chair

Position: FAV



**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 586**  
**Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program –**  
**Establishment**  
*Senate Budget and Taxation Committee*  
February 25, 2025

**POVERTY FREE MARYLAND**

**Voting Member Agencies:**

Anne Arundel County Food Bank  
Baltimore Jewish Council  
CASH Campaign of Maryland  
Catholic Charities  
Family League of Baltimore  
Laurel Advocacy & Referral Services,  
Inc.  
Maryland Center on Economic Policy  
Maryland Family Network  
Maryland Food Bank  
Maryland Hunger Solutions  
**Poverty Free Maryland**

**Poverty Free Maryland supports SB 586**, which aims to establish \$10 million in annual state funding to support schools and school districts that offer school meals at no cost to all of their students through the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

Studies have long shown that school meals reduce childhood hunger, decrease rates of childhood obesity, improve nutrition and wellness, enhance development and school readiness, and support learning, attendance, and behavior.<sup>1</sup> Recent studies reaffirm that access to nutritious meals in school increases long-term health and educational outcomes for children by establishing healthy eating habits early on.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these proven benefits, the current tiered payment system allows too many children to fall through the cracks. While school meals remain one of the federal government's most powerful tools for delivering good nutrition to children, the low eligibility threshold excludes many families who struggle to meet their most basic needs from receiving any assistance. For example, a family of four living on just \$59,500 per year is ineligible for the free or reduced-price school meal program. With inflation levels and grocery prices at a historic high on top of Maryland's already high cost of living, many Maryland families living above this threshold still struggle financially and are unable to make school meal payments, leading to burdensome school meal debt. Additional obstacles

<sup>1</sup> Food Research & Action Center (2016). Research Brief: Breakfast for Learning. Available at <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforlearning-1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Food Research & Action Center (2021). School Meals are Essential Health and Learning. Available at <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning.pdf>

*Founded in 2025 through the merger of Welfare Advocates (established in 1979) and Marylanders Against Poverty (established in 1988), **Poverty Free Maryland** is a coalition of service providers, faith groups, and other organizations working together to exchange information, educate decisionmakers, and advocate for statewide public policies and programs necessary to address the underlying systemic causes of poverty and ensure that low-income Marylanders are provided with low- and no-barrier access to all resources needed to thrive and build a better life for the future.*

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such as language barriers, misinformation, and stigma prevent many eligible families from applying for assistance.

CEP eliminates many of these barriers by providing breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost without the need for meal applications. CEP has proven successful in addressing food insecurity, eliminating unpaid meal fees, and reducing administrative burdens in over 700 schools in Maryland - covering over 390,000 students across 19 counties.

Unfortunately, cuts to SNAP and Medicaid that were included in the federal H.R. 1 budget package are threatening the ability of schools and districts to maintain their CEP status. Children whose households participate in SNAP and Medicaid are directly certified for free school meals. Direct certification leverages data and technology to automatically link children in SNAP households with free school meals, eliminating the need for a school meal application. Direct certification rates are the primary basis for determining which schools can utilize the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) to offer free meals to all students. These rates are used to determine eligibility, with schools becoming eligible for CEP when over 25% of their student population is directly certified.

Direct certification rates are also used as the basis of the federal reimbursement formula that determines how much CEP schools get reimbursed for the meals they serve. The more children directly certified for free school meals, the more likely a school can implement CEP and the more financially sustainable the program becomes. As barriers to SNAP and Medicaid grow and fewer students are able to receive these benefits, we will see a decrease in the number of students able to be directly certified for free school meals, leading to lower federal reimbursement levels for our current CEP schools, which could lead to a lack of financial sustainability and inability to maintain CEP participation.

SB586 aims to address this new threat to CEP by providing state funding to supplement the declining federal reimbursements. Making this investment in CEP schools is an important step towards ensuring that students have access to the healthy meals they need to grow and thrive in the classroom and beyond – advancing equity, ending stigma, and investing in Maryland's future.

**Poverty Free Maryland** envisions a Maryland without poverty, and a future where all Marylanders have the support and economic stability that's needed to thrive.

# **SB 586 - Maryland Food Bank - FAV.pdf**

Uploaded by: Anne Wallerstedt

Position: FAV

**SB 586**  
**Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment**

**Senate Budget & Taxation Committee**  
**Senate Energy, Education, and the Environment Committee**  
**February 23, 2026**

**FAVORABLE**

Senate Bill 586 creates the Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program in the Maryland State Department of Education. The bill funds the program at \$10 million, which would be paid by the state to schools that participate in the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the National School Lunch Program.

The Maryland Food Bank estimates that 1 in 3 Marylanders are at risk of food insecurity. A person who is food insecure does not have consistent access to healthy and nutritious food on any given day, and this problem persists in every area of the state. There are also communities and populations who are disproportionately affected by food insecurity, including families with children and communities of color. The causes of food insecurity are complex and often include additional factors such as low income, lack of reliable transportation, and missing community resources such as grocery stores.

The economic stability of a child's family should not dictate whether they are able to eat nutritious food every day, yet for too many Marylanders this is the reality. However, it is not just families in the lowest income bracket who are struggling. In 2025, 39% of Marylanders found it difficult to afford their basic household necessities – including food, and more alarming is that food insecurity has increased 25% since 2019, and child hunger alone has increased 12%.

The Maryland Food Bank sees firsthand the absolute beneficial impact of meals that are served while children are at schools or other safe community centers through our Supper Club and our Summer Club, which served 596,176 meals combined in FY25. Further, we operate food pantries at 172 K-12 schools across the state, where in FY25 we distributed the equivalent of over 2.1 million meals. The sheer magnitude of need is present in these programs, and the Maryland Food Bank knows that our efforts, while substantial, cannot alone solve child food insecurity in the state, as a crucial time of day for children to eat is missing – namely, breakfasts and lunches.

The Maryland Food Bank appreciates your consideration and respectfully requests a favorable report on SB 586.

**SB 586\_MoCoFoodCouncil\_FAV.pdf**

Uploaded by: Annmarie Hart-Bookbinder

Position: FAV



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.



**MDCAPE - SB 586 - CEP Expansion - SUPPORT.pdf**

Uploaded by: Ariel Sadwin

Position: FAV



**SENATE BUDGET AND TAXATION COMMITTEE**

**FEBRUARY 25, 2026**

**SENATE BILL 586**

**COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION EXPANSION PROGRAM – ESTABLISHMENT  
SUPPORT**

Maryland CAPE is our state's chapter and one of 40 state chapters of the Council for American Private Education. Our network includes the Catholic, Christian, Evangelical Lutheran, Friends, Independent, Jewish, Lutheran, Montessori, Muslim, and Seventh Day Adventist school communities. We speak on behalf of over 138,000 nonpublic school students attending over one thousand nonpublic schools across our great state of Maryland. We issue this testimony in support of Senate Bill 586.

SB 586 would complement federal funds from the Community Eligibility Provision of the Child Nutrition Programs by providing additional funding. The funds would be dispensed through county boards, based on the concentration of poverty in public schools and would consider geographic diversity in determining funding prioritization.

Food insecurity has become increasingly salient in discussions regarding improving the lot of vulnerable Marylanders. Food insecurity affects the entire family, but has a particularly negative effect on children and young adults. Without proper sustenance, students are more likely to struggle and suffer emotionally, academically, and physically. Repeated studies show that school food programs for students can lead to improved outcomes in many areas of life. Additionally, such a program lifts some of the economic burden that weighs down on parents struggling to make ends meet.

Food insecurity sadly affects students of public and nonpublic schools alike. Our nonpublic schools serve a diverse array of students, and we seek to ensure that all of them are able to overcome any food insecurity challenges, both for the sake of their own health and in order to increase their learning opportunities.

SB 586 would help ensure better outcomes for students by helping ensure that they receive the food they need. We respectfully ask that you issue a FAVORABLE REPORT on Senate Bill 586.

Thank you.

# **SB586 Free State PTA - favorable.pdf**

Uploaded by: Beth Jarrett

Position: FAV

**Testimony in Support of SB 586 – Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program -  
Establishment**

*Senate Budget & Taxation Committee*

February 25, 2026

**FAVORABLE**

Free State PTA (FSPTA) represents over 70,000 volunteer members and families in over 500 public schools. As the state's premier and largest child advocacy organization, Free State PTA is a powerful voice for all children, a relevant resource for families, schools and communities, and a strong advocate for public education. ***We are offering a favorable testimony in support of Senate Bill 586.***

Too many children miss out on the benefits of school meals because of the current tiered payment structure, which requires a family of four to earn less than \$57,000 annually to qualify for no-cost meals. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a proven solution to this issue. 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. 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. Despite these benefits, not all schools are able to use CEP because of limitations in the current federal reimbursement structure. Establishing a state CEP supplement would help make the program financially sustainable for more schools. ***This \$10 million per year investment from the state could help up to 200 additional schools opt into CEP and offer breakfast and lunch to the over 90,000 students attending those schools.***

This legislation is an essential investment for the health and academic success of Maryland students. Supporting this bill would be supporting equity in the classroom and making sure every child has the nourishment they need to excel. These meals are important to students' academic success just as textbooks or transportation are and should be treated as a critical component to education. When students are distracted by hunger because they are unable to afford school breakfast or lunch, they miss out on the chance to learn and benefit from the important opportunities offered by Maryland's education system. Hungry kids can't learn. Ensuring that every child in the state has access to a nutritious school breakfast and lunch every day is a critical and effective investment in Maryland's communities and future.

Free State PTA urges the committee to issue a favorable report on SB 586.

Thank you,  
Free State PTA, Advocacy Committee

# **SB 586 Community Eligibility Provision Expansion P**

Uploaded by: Carlos Orbe, Jr.

Position: FAV

February 23, 2026

The Honorable Guy Guzzone  
Chair, Senate Budget and Taxation Committee  
Miller Senate Office Building  
3 West  
11 Bladen Street  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Support for Senate Bill 586 Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program  
Establishment

Dear Chair Guzzone,

Maryland Latinos Unidos respectfully supports Senate Bill 586, which establishes the Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program to increase access to universal school meals.

Food insecurity is a persistent challenge affecting working families across Maryland. National data from the United States Department of Agriculture show that Latino households experience food insecurity at significantly higher rates than White households. Food insecurity is directly associated with lower academic performance, higher absenteeism, and negative health outcomes for children.

The Community Eligibility Provision allows high poverty schools to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students without requiring individual applications. Research from the Brookings Institution and the Food Research and Action Center demonstrates that universal meal programs increase participation, reduce stigma, improve attendance, and support academic achievement.

For Latino students, many of whom are eligible for free or reduced price meals, universal access removes administrative barriers and stigma that can discourage participation. It also ensures that immigrant parents who may face language barriers are not excluded from benefits due to paperwork challenges.

Implications for Latino and immigrant communities

Senate Bill 586 advances educational equity and child well being by ensuring consistent nutrition access. For Latino families, expansion of the Community Eligibility Provision means:

- Reduced food insecurity
- Improved student attendance
- Greater classroom engagement
- Reduced administrative burden for parents

Maryland Latinos Unidos can work with school systems to ensure families receive clear communication in Spanish and other languages regarding meal access and related benefits.

For these reasons, Maryland Latinos Unidos respectfully urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 586.

Sincerely,

Carlos Orbe, Jr.  
Communications and Public Affairs Specialist  
Maryland Latinos Unidos  
corbejr@mdlatinosunidos.org

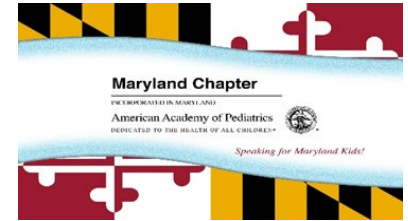
# **SB0586\_FAV\_MedChi, MDAAP\_Community Eligibility Pro**

Uploaded by: Christine Krone

Position: FAV



The Maryland State Medical Society  
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Baltimore, MD 21201-5516  
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1.800.492.1056  
www.medchi.org



Senate Budget and Taxation Committee  
Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee  
February 25, 2026  
Senate Bill 586 – *Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment*  
**POSITION: SUPPORT**

On behalf of The Maryland State Medical Society (MedChi), and the Maryland Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (MDAAP), we submit this letter of support for Senate Bill 586. This bill establishes the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Expansion Program within the Maryland State Department of Education. It provides state funding to eligible schools participating in the federal CEP under child nutrition programs. Specifically, the state will cover the difference between the federal paid reimbursement rate and the free reimbursement rate, ensuring full funding for school meals. Starting in Fiscal Year 2028, the Governor must allocate \$10 million annually to support the program.

The CEP is a vital federal initiative that allows schools in low-income areas to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students, eliminating the need for income-based applications. As physicians and advocates for child health, MedChi and MDAAP strongly support the expansion of CEP in Maryland schools. Proper nutrition is fundamental to children's physical health, cognitive development, and overall well-being, and the CEP is a critical tool in ensuring equitable access to nutritious meals.

Research has consistently shown that school meal programs play a crucial role in combatting food insecurity, improving diet quality, and reducing childhood obesity. Reliable access to balanced meals supports healthy growth and development, enhances immune function, and decreases the risk of chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes and hypertension.

The CEP significantly enhances child nutrition and health by ensuring all students have access to essential nutrients necessary for their growth and well-being. Participation in school meal programs has been linked to healthier body weights and a lower risk of obesity-related conditions. Additionally, consistent access to nutritious meals supports cognitive function, reducing difficulties in concentration and improving academic performance. Proper nutrition also plays a crucial role in mental health by alleviating stress, anxiety, and behavioral issues linked to food insecurity. Beyond academic benefits, CEP helps lower the prevalence of diet-related illnesses, reducing long-term healthcare costs for families and the state. Eliminating income verification barriers increases participation and removes stigma, ensuring all children receive the nutrition they need without administrative or social obstacles.

Ensuring that all children receive adequate nutrition is not just an educational issue, it is a critical public health priority. By investing in school meal programs, we invest in healthier children, stronger academic outcomes, and a more equitable future for all Maryland students. No child should have to worry about where their next meal will come from, especially in a school setting designed to foster growth and learning. Implementing CEP broadly will help ensure that every student has access to the nutrition they need to thrive. For these reasons, MedChi and MDAAP urge a favorable report.

**For more information call:**

Christine K. Krone  
J. Steven Wise  
Danna L. Kauffman  
Andrew G. Vetter  
410-244-7000

# **SB586 – Community Eligibility Provision Expansion**

Uploaded by: Craig Rice

Position: FAV



## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 586

### Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment

*Senate Budget and Taxation Committee*

February 23, 2026

Manna Food Center 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.

Manna Food Center has served residents in Montgomery County, Maryland, since its humble beginnings in a vacant elementary school in 1983, serving just a few hundred recipients with a single pledge of \$3,100, and a donation of 16,000 pounds of food. In 2025, 42 years later, Manna distributed **3.14 million pounds of food** and infused **\$356,450** into the local economy.

In 2024-2025, Manna served **7,922 students and families** at 94 school partners through various programs such as monthly markets, weekend bags, and grocery gift cards. Our direct connection to the school system puts us at the front line of serving some of the **218,000 children** living in food-insecure households in Maryland. These school-based programs allow us to gain insights into the factors causing food insecurity for working families in Montgomery County. We know firsthand that the absence of CEP at schools adversely impacts the entire family, school administrative systems, and consequentially, all of our interconnected communities.

Without CEP, schools that are currently able to provide a healthy breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost will return to burdensome paperwork, unpaid meal debt, and more barriers to access that allow too many students to fall through the cracks. When students have access to free meals at schools, families are able to lower grocery bills and stretch their incomes to meet other basic needs. School meals also play a critical role in reducing childhood hunger and ensuring that students are fueled up and ready to learn. Research shows that students in CEP schools are approximately three times less likely to experience food insecurity compared to those in eligible schools that do not participate.

We are also witnessing recent cuts to SNAP and Medicaid, and fatal incidents across the country with federal law enforcement, leading to fewer students applying to and receiving these federal benefits. Consequently, this is reducing the number of students directly certified for free school meals. Schools are already burdened by limitations in the current federal reimbursement structure, and our current context will make it more difficult for schools and districts to meet the CEP threshold.

To prevent these circumstances from putting Maryland's progress towards ending childhood hunger at risk, CEP schools must be supported by state funding. The funding in HB 704/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.



**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. HB 704 is 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 remain hunger-free!

Manna's School-Based Program Partners and Team Members shared the following quotes on the importance of CEP in Montgomery County.

"CEP allows the majority of our students to receive free breakfast and lunch at school, ensuring they have access to healthy meals each day. It eases the burden on parents and caregivers, who can feel confident that their children are being fed without the added stress of providing those meals themselves. CEP also reduces the number of forms families must complete, which is especially important for those who may feel uncomfortable sharing sensitive personal information. In the past, this has led to underrepresentation in reported data. Continuing and expanding CEP would allow even more families to benefit and would help ensure children do not have to worry about where their next meal is coming from."

— *Lindsay Dankmyer, Community School Liaison,  
Jackson Road Elementary School*

"Expanding the Community CE is very important for supporting our school communities. CEP allows all students to receive free breakfast and lunch without families having to fill out applications or paperwork. This helps more students participate in school meals and removes any stigma. When students have access to healthy meals every day, they are more focused, attend school more regularly, and are better prepared to learn and succeed."

— *Community School Liaison,  
S. Christa McAuliffe Elementary School*

"The CEP is so incredibly important for our students in MCPS. Families count on that breakfast and lunch, as many do not have much food at home. Honestly, academics could be impacted significantly if students aren't able to get those meals. It's incredibly hard to concentrate and learn without fuel."

— *Sandra Carin West, School-Based Programs Coordinator,  
Manna Food Center*

*[Sandra also worked within Montgomery County Public Schools across a variety of roles for three decades, 1993-2024]*



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

Sincerely,  
Manna Food Center

Craig L. Rice, CEO  
240.268.2524  
[craig@mannafood.org](mailto:craig@mannafood.org)

**SB586\_MOST\_FAVORABLE.pdf**

Uploaded by: Ellie Mitchell

Position: FAV



**Senate Bill 586: Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program - Establishment  
Budget & Tax and Education, Energy & Environment, February 25, 2026  
Position: Favorable**

The Maryland Out of School Time Network (MOST) is a statewide organization dedicated to closing opportunity gaps by expanding both the quantity and quality of afterschool and summer learning opportunities for school-aged young people. MOST serves as the backbone organization for the Maryland Coalition for Community Schools and MENTOR MD | DC. The Maryland Education Coalition (MEC) advocates for adequate funding, equitable policies, and transparent accountability statewide.

MOST, MD4CS, MENTOR MD|DC & MEC enthusiastically support Senate Bill 586 to support expanding the use of community eligibility where appropriate in Maryland. Community Eligibility has several key benefits for students and school districts. In areas where poverty is widespread or concentrated, Community Eligibility removes the stigma of being categorized as a “FARM” student. It eliminates out-of-pocket costs for families who are already struggling. Removing these concerns will make families more food-secure and allow students to focus on their academics. Expanding Community Eligibility will also make it easier for after-school programs to offer snacks and supper. It also removes the challenges of collecting individual FARM data for school districts, improves food access equity, and enables districts to implement innovative delivery models. Passing this bill will also send a message to Congress that states like Maryland are committed to community eligibility— a critical tone to strike in the current climate.

Federal cuts to SNAP and Medicaid threaten to reduce the number of students who qualify for direct certification for free school meals. This, in turn, could push some schools and districts below the minimum eligibility threshold for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and further weaken already-insufficient federal reimbursements that schools rely on to operate meal programs. Creating a \$10 million state CEP supplement fund, as proposed in this bill, would help make CEP financially viable for more Maryland schools—and help stabilize existing CEP schools that could see reimbursement declines due to the impacts of H.R. 1.

With the cost of living rising and more families struggling to meet basic needs, expanding CEP in Maryland is essential to ensuring students have consistent access to meals. SB 586 is an important step toward reducing hunger, improving student health and academic outcomes, and easing financial strain on families. We applaud Senator Gazzone for sponsoring this bill and urge a favorable report for SB586.

Rick Tyler, Co-Chair, MEC, [md.ed.coalition@gmail.com](mailto:md.ed.coalition@gmail.com)

Ellie Mitchell, Co-Chair, MEC, Director, MOST Network/MD4CS, [emitchell@mostnetwork.org](mailto:emitchell@mostnetwork.org)

**SB 586\_Horizon Foundation\_FAV.pdf**

Uploaded by: Glenn Schneider

Position: FAV



February 25, 2026

**COMMITTEE:** Senate Budget and Taxation Committee

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

**POSITION:** Support

The Horizon Foundation is the largest independent health philanthropy in Maryland. We are committed to a Howard County free from systemic inequities, where all people can live abundant and healthy lives. The Foundation is pleased to **support SB 586 – Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment**. This bill would 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 play an important role in reducing childhood hunger and ensuring that students are fueled up and ready to learn. However, too many children miss out on the benefits of school meals because of the current tiered payment structure, which requires a family of four to earn less than \$59,500 annually to qualify for no-cost meals.

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. 11 of these schools are in Howard County. 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>i</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>ii</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 can 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.

SB 586 would establish a \$10 million CEP supplement fund at the state level, helping to make the program financially sustainable for more schools across the state as well as protect the

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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.

Like many communities across the state, food insecurity has increased in recent years in Howard County, particularly for lower- and middle-income families. For many students, school meals are their primary source of daily calories and nutrition. 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 step 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.

All children should have the nutrition they need to learn and thrive. For this reason, the Foundation **SUPPORTS SB 586** and urges a **FAVORABLE** report. Thank you for your consideration.

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<sup>i</sup> Hecht, A., Neff, R., Kelley, T., & Pollack Porter, K. (2021). Universal free schools 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>ii</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.

# **MD Hunger Solutions - Support for SB 586 - CEP Exp**

Uploaded by: Julia Gross

Position: FAV



February 25, 2026

## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 586

### Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program - Establishment

*Senate Budget & Taxation Committee*

*Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee*

Greetings Chairs Guzzone and Feldman, Vice Chairs Rosapepe and Kagan, and Members of the Committees.

**Maryland Hunger Solutions strongly supports SB 586**, which aims to provide \$10 million in state funding to support schools implementing the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) to provide a healthy school breakfast and school lunch to all children at no cost to them or their families.

As a statewide, non-partisan, nonprofit working to end hunger in Maryland, Maryland Hunger Solutions strives to overcome existing barriers to state and federal nutrition assistance programs and create self-sustaining connections between Maryland residents and nutritious foods. Among these nutrition programs, the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program play a critical role as the nation's first line of defense against childhood food insecurity.

The school meal programs have been shown to be some of the healthiest meals children consume on a daily basis, providing students with nutrition they need to learn and thrive during the school day and beyond. [Multiple studies have linked participation in school meals to an incredible number of beneficial outcomes for students](#) including reduced food insecurity, decreased rates of obesity, and improved overall nutrition and wellness. Beyond reducing hunger, this research also links participation in school meals to positive educational outcomes such as enhanced child development and school readiness, and improved academic achievement, attendance, and classroom behavior.

Maryland has made great strides in the past to expand access to school meals, such as covering the reduced-price copay for low-income families, and expanding the number of students directly certified for free meals through Medicaid data matching. However, the most effective way that schools can expand access to school meals is by participating in the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which is an existing federal provision that allows high-poverty schools and districts to provide school meal at no cost to students.

Since its establishment in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, the CEP has served as a critical resource for school districts to help keep children fed, alleviate child hunger, and advance racial equity and child well-being. The benefits we have seen from serving all students' school meals at no cost



through CEP underscore the importance of this nutritional safety net to the health and well-being of Maryland communities.

Research conducted in Maryland points to the benefits of CEP, which include more children eating breakfast and lunch at school, families' ability to stretch their food budgets at home, and removing the burden of school meal debt from families and school systems.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, a study conducted by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health on the implementation of the CEP in Maryland clearly shows that students who attend CEP schools are almost three times less likely to be food insecure than their counterparts attending CEP eligible schools that don't participate in the program.<sup>2</sup>

Currently, **there are over 700 Maryland schools across 19 counties successfully using CEP to offer school meals for free to all 390,000 of their students**, including every school in Allegany County, Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Caroline County, Dorchester County, Garrett County, Kent County, Somerset County, and Wicomico County.

These schools and districts operating CEP do not charge a fee to students for school meals and instead receive federal reimbursements for meals served using a formula based on the percentage of children who are eligible to be directly certified for free meals without an application (**see attachment: *Understanding the Community Eligibility Provision for more details on the federal reimbursement formula***).

While there are many factors that contribute to a school district's decision to participate in CEP, one of the most common barriers to participation is the financial viability of the program due to the inadequacy of this federal reimbursement formula. SB 586 aims to address this barrier by establishing state funding to supplement federal reimbursements received for meals served in CEP schools across the state.

This bill was originally introduced in 2025 to help make CEP sustainable in non-participating schools that currently find the program financially unviable. However, recent federal cuts to SNAP and Medicaid included in H.R. 1 have shifted the purpose of this legislation, due to the trickle down impacts these cuts are projected to have on schools currently implementing CEP.

H.R. 1 made deep cuts to SNAP and Medicaid by slashing benefits, expanding harsh work requirements, eliminating eligibility for many humanitarian immigrants, capping future benefit increases, and shifting unprecedented new costs to states. **These cuts to SNAP and Medicaid are cuts to school meals.**

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<sup>1</sup> Hecht, A., Neff, R., Kelley, T., & Pollack Porter, K. (2021). Universal free schools 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>2</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.



Children whose households participate in SNAP and Medicaid are directly certified for free school meals. This direct certification rate is the primary basis for determining which schools can utilize CEP. It is also the basis of the federal reimbursement formula that determines the federal reimbursement level a CEP school receives. Therefore, the more children who can be directly certified for free school meals through SNAP and Medicaid data, the more likely a school will be eligible for CEP and the more financially sustainable the program becomes.

As H.R. 1 policies are implemented, barriers to SNAP and Medicaid will grow, and fewer students will be able to receive or maintain these benefits, meaning fewer students will be able to be directly certified for free school meals.

Lower direct certification levels will make it harder for schools and districts to meet the minimum CEP eligibility threshold of 25%. Moreover, this will likely cause reimbursement rates for current CEP schools to drop, forcing schools and districts to make the difficult decision to either contribute more local resources to filling that gap or dropping from CEP altogether.

Maryland has an opportunity to create a safety net for our current CEP schools by providing state funding to help fill the gap that will be caused by the federal cuts in H.R. 1.

Schools at risk of losing their CEP status because of the trickle-down impact of federal cuts will be forced to return to a system where we will see the following:

**The solution remains clear.** At a time when historic cuts to SNAP and Medicaid threaten schools' ability to provide school meals at no cost, supporting Maryland school districts in maximizing their use of CEP is critical. CEP has played a fundamental role in supporting schools with a high percentage of students who reside in households experiencing low income.

SB 586 would create a safety net for Maryland's current CEP schools at risk of losing federal funding by providing state funds to make up the difference between a school's current CEP reimbursement rate and the 100% free-meal reimbursement rate set at the federal level. By passing and enacting SB 586, Maryland will be able to protect the current progress we've made and ensure that federal actions do not force our CEP schools to return to a tiered payment system that allows too many students to fall through the cracks.

While we look forward to a time when Maryland joins the list of states that provide school meals at no cost to ALL children, **Maryland Hunger Solutions respectfully urges a favorable report on SB 586** as an important step towards this goal by investing in and safeguarding our children's health and nutrition.

Thank you for your consideration.

# Understanding the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is an existing federal provision that allows schools with high poverty levels to offer breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students while eliminating the traditional school meal application process.



## Benefits of using CEP:

- **Increased Participation** — when both school lunches and breakfasts are served to all students at no cost, more students have access to healthy meals that help them thrive and perform better academically.
- **Less administrative work** — schools no longer have to collect and verify school meal applications.
- **Eliminates unpaid meal fees** — when all students eat at no charge, they will not accrue school meal debt.
- **Improves the financial viability of school nutrition programs** — when participation increases, school districts can take advantage of economies of scale, and reinvest additional revenue into expanding menus, providing staff training, and implementing best practices such as farm to school and breakfast after the bell.

## How do schools opt into CEP?

CEP can be implemented for a single school, group of schools, or districtwide as long as the total percentage of “identified students” is 25% or higher.

**Identified students** — those who are automatically enrolled to receive free school meals without an application because:

- their household receives benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR);
- they are identified as homeless, migrant, enrolled in Head Start, or in foster care.

The Identified Student Percentage (ISP) is calculated using the formula:

$$\text{ISP} = \frac{\text{\# of identified students}}{\text{\# of total enrolled students}}$$

Schools opt into CEP on a 4-year cycle. Once elected, a school’s Identified Student Percentage (ISP) and federal reimbursement rate is locked in for 4 years or until the school recertifies.

## How are CEP schools reimbursed?

Schools are reimbursed by USDA for each complete meal served to a student.

CEP schools calculate their reimbursement rates by multiplying the ISP by 1.6 to determine the percentage of meals that will be reimbursed at the highest “FREE” rate, with the rest being reimbursed at the lowest “PAID” rate.

SY 25-26 reimbursement rates for severe need schools:

- **FREE rates:** \$4.62 per lunch; \$2.54 per breakfast
- **PAID rates:** \$0.46 per lunch; \$0.40 per breakfast

CEP Reimbursement Examples		
ISP	% FREE Reimbursements	% PAID Reimbursements
25%	40%	60%
40%	64%	36%
50%	80%	20%
60%	96%	4%
62.50%	100%	0%

# COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY SUPPORTS CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND LEARNING

In **MARYLAND**, approximately **218,000** children live in food-insecure households, jeopardizing their health and well-being.<sup>1</sup>

School meal programs combat food insecurity by providing millions of children with the nutrition they need to learn and thrive.

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is an option within the school meal programs that increases students' access to nutritious food by allowing schools and school districts serving large numbers of children from families with low incomes to offer meals at no charge to all students.

## How CEP Schools Are Reimbursed

Rather than relying on school meal applications to determine a school's federal reimbursements, CEP schools are reimbursed based on the share of students who are automatically eligible for free school meals without an application because they meet specific criteria, such as being in foster care or participating in certain federal means-tested programs, including SNAP. Schools can adopt CEP if at least 25 percent of students meet these criteria. The more students who are automatically eligible for free school meals, the more federal reimbursement CEP schools receive.

## CEP Is a Win for Students, Families, and Schools

CEP provides all students access to the balanced school breakfasts and lunches they need to be well-nourished and ready to learn, while reducing the stigma often present in school cafeterias when schools have to track students' eligibility for free, reduced-price, and paid meals.

**When students have access to free meals at school, families have lower grocery bills and more money in their household budgets to help make ends meet.**

CEP makes school meal operations more efficient and effective for schools and districts. CEP eliminates the administrative burden associated with school meal applications, strengthens program integrity, and supports school nutrition finances by eliminating school meal debt and increasing participation in school breakfast and lunch programs, which allows for economies of scale.

**In the 2024–2025 school year, 74 percent of eligible schools nationwide adopted CEP. These 54,000 schools reached more than 27 million students around the country.**



In the 2024–2025 school year:

**700** SCHOOLS

in **MARYLAND** adopted CEP. An additional **397** schools were eligible to adopt CEP but did not participate.

## THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP) CUTS

recently enacted in H.R. 1 will **exacerbate food insecurity** and have ripple effects for the school meal programs, including threatening schools' ability to implement CEP.

As children lose access to SNAP, their automatic eligibility for free school meals is severed and federal reimbursement for meals served in CEP schools decreases, jeopardizing the program's financial viability.

## In **MARYLAND**, during the 2024–2025 school year:

 **471,311**

children ate a school lunch and **252,595** children ate a school breakfast on an average school day.<sup>2</sup>

 **23**

school districts adopted CEP for some or all schools. An additional **12** school districts had schools that were eligible to adopt CEP but did not participate.

 **392,075**

children attended schools that adopted CEP.

**By repealing SNAP cuts and investing in CEP, policymakers can reduce barriers that keep eligible children from receiving free school meals and help families afford to put food on the table.**

<sup>1</sup> Analysis of 2021–2023 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, rounded to the nearest 1,000. The data for this analysis was pooled across multiple years to ensure adequate sample sizes for every state. As a result, cross-state comparisons using multiple fact sheets may cover different time periods.

<sup>2</sup> Average daily participation data for school breakfast and lunch are reflective of April 2025. U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. (2025). State-level table current activity. Accessed September 24, 2025. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>

The following table identifies the school districts in each of **MARYLAND'S** congressional districts that contain CEP-eligible and participating schools, as well as the number of children enrolled in CEP schools for the 2024–2025 school year.<sup>3</sup>

School District	Number of CEP-Eligible Schools	Number of CEP-Participating Schools	Students Enrolled in CEP-Participating Schools
<b>Congressional District #1</b>			
BALTIMORE CO PUB SCH	174	174	111,000
CAROLINE CO PUB SCH	9	9	5,728
CECIL CO PUB SCH	31	14	6,233
DORCHESTER CO BOARD OF ED	11	11	4,614
HARFORD CO PUB SCH	26	17	11,022
KENT CO BRD OF ED	5	5	1,763
QUEEN ANNES COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION	9	0	
SOMERSET CO PUB SCH	7	7	2,893
TALBOT CO PUB SCH	8	0	
WICOMICO CO BRD OF ED	26	26	15,223
WORCESTER CO BRD OF ED	13	9	3,627
<b>Congressional District #2</b>			
BALTIMORE CITY PUB SCH	158	157	75,610
BALTIMORE CO PUB SCH	174	174	111,000
<b>Congressional District #3</b>			
HOWARD CO PUB SCH	32	11	5,179
<b>Congressional District #4</b>			
MONTGOMERY CO PUB SCH	123	61	36,607
PRINCE GEORGE'S CO. PUBLIC SCHOOL	188	132	86,807
<b>Congressional District #5</b>			
CHARLES COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	33	12	7,572
PRINCE GEORGE'S CO. PUBLIC SCHOOL	188	132	86,807
ST MARYS CO PUB SCH	18	3	1,478

School District	Number of CEP-Eligible Schools	Number of CEP-Participating Schools	Students Enrolled in CEP-Participating Schools
<b>Congressional District #6</b>			
ALLEGANY CO PUB SCH	24	24	8,132
FREDERICK CO PUB SCH	32	1	51
GARRETT CO PUB SCH	13	0	
MONTGOMERY CO PUB SCH	123	61	36,607
WASHINGTON CO PUB SCH	41	15	5,499
<b>Congressional District #7</b>			
BALTIMORE CITY PUB SCH	158	157	75,610
BALTIMORE CO PUB SCH	174	174	111,000
<b>Congressional District #8</b>			
MONTGOMERY CO PUB SCH	123	61	36,607
PRINCE GEORGE'S CO. PUBLIC SCHOOL	188	132	86,807
<b>Unassigned School Districts</b>			
Not all school districts could be matched to congressional districts due to data inconsistencies			
ANNE ARUNDEL CO PUB SCH	72	0	
ARCHDIOCESE OF BALTIMORE	8	8	1,969
BALTIMORE CO PUB SCH	1	0	
CALVERT CO PUB SCH	13	0	
CARROLL CO PUB SCH	13	0	
CHEDER CHABAD INC.	1	1	395
CONGREGATION OHEL LEVI YITZCHOK LUBAVITCH	1	0	
DON BOSCO CRISTO REY HIGH SCHOOL	1	0	
KENNEDY KRIEGER	1	0	
MARYLAND SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND	1	1	206
PHILLIPS PROGRAMS	1	0	
SEED SCHOOL OF MARYLAND	1	1	357
ST. IGNATIUS LOYOLA ACADEMY, INC	1	1	110
TORAH INSTITUTE OF BALTIMORE	1	0	

**NOTE:** School districts, rather than individual schools, are listed under congressional districts. If a school district crosses congressional district boundaries, all of their schools and children are included in each congressional district. Not all school districts could be matched to congressional districts due to inconsistencies in how the data sources numerically identify and name school districts and schools. Unmatched school districts are listed as unassigned.

<sup>3</sup> Food Research & Action Center. (2025). Community Eligibility Provision database for the 2024–2025 school year. <https://frac.org/community-eligibility-database/>. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Common core of data for the 2023–2024 school year. <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/files.asp>; and NCES. School district geographic relationship files for the 119th Congress. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/geographic/relationshipfiles>

# **Rosen-TestimonyInSupportOf-SB586-ChildMeals.pdf**

Uploaded by: Julie Rosen

Position: FAV

February 9, 2026

**Written Testimony on SB 586**

**Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment**

**Budget and Taxation Committee and Education, Energy, and Environment Committee**

**Position: Favorable**

Dear Budget and Taxation, and Education, Energy, and Environment Committee Members:

My name is Julie A. Rosen, and I submit this written testimony as an individual resident of Montgomery County, Maryland (MD District 16), and a member of the National Council of Jewish Women, MD State Project Advocacy Committee. I write to urge your support for **SB 586** *Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment*.

My first exposure to young children students who are not provided with breakfast or lunch was when I served as a high school tutor of elementary students in Baltimore, MD. Those weekend mornings allowed me to teach a young child about the use of ‘dry math’ concepts to everyday life, which was enlightening to my proteges. Even more enlightening was my learning of the challenges these students had to thrive at school when they were far from thriving at home due to lack of access to food. Since that time, and as part of the values I was taught by my Jewish heritage, I have considering coaching of young students to hold dear both of those informative undertakings. This life view is at the core of my understanding of SB586.

School meals play an important role in reducing childhood hunger and ensuring that students are fueled up and ready to learn. However, too many children miss out on the benefits of school meals because of the current tiered payment structure, which requires a family of four to earn less than \$59,500 annually to qualify for no-cost meals.

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. However, despite the demonstrated benefits of CEP, 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. I am aware of recent surveys of the MD schools who did not file for CEP because of the burden of such paperwork.

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.

If we cannot feed the most vulnerable children in our community schools, then the future of MD as a ‘family friendly’ place to reside and raise the next generation is at risk. I respectfully urge a favorable report on SB586. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Julie A. Rosen, Ph.D.

**SB 586\_MD Center on Economic Policy\_FAV.pdf**

Uploaded by: Kali Schumitz

Position: FAV



FEBRUARY 25, 2026

## Expanding Access to Universal School Meals Will Boost Health, Learning, and Future Prospects for Maryland's Students

### Position Statement Supporting Senate Bill 586

*Given Before the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee*

For a state's economy to be resilient, its future workforce must be healthy and educated. Hunger is a direct, preventable barrier to that goal. When children are hungry, their cognitive development is hindered, leading to long-term costs in the form of healthcare expenses and lost productivity. **The Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports Senate Bill 586, which establishes the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Expansion Program.** By providing \$10 million in supplemental funding to help schools bridge the gap between federal reimbursement rates and the actual cost of meals, this legislation ensures that more Maryland students have access to healthy, reliable nutrition without the stigma or administrative burden of traditional meal applications.

Food security is a prerequisite for academic success and long-term economic mobility. When students are hungry, they cannot learn. Research consistently shows that universal school meals lead to:

- Improved academic performance: Higher test scores in math and reading
- Better health outcomes: Reduced rates of childhood obesity and hospitalization
- Increased attendance: Lower rates of absenteeism and tardiness.

Maryland families continue to face significant economic headwinds. Recent federal policy have placed immense pressure on household budgets. Data indicates that nearly one in three Maryland households with children currently struggle to afford consistent, nutritious meals<sup>1</sup>.

Senate Bill 586 addresses these challenges through a three-pronged economic strategy:

**Maximizing Federal Investment:** The federal Community Eligibility Provision allows schools in high-poverty areas to serve free breakfast and lunch to all students. However, the federal reimbursement formula often leaves a gap that local school systems struggle to fill. Senate Bill 586 requires the state to pay the difference between the federal "paid" reimbursement rate and the "free" reimbursement rate, making it financially viable for every eligible school (those with an Identified Student Percentage of 25% or higher) to participate.

**Immediate Relief for Working Families:** In 2026, many Maryland families are still feeling the squeeze of high living costs. By expanding CEP, Senate Bill 586 acts as an immediate income support, allowing families to redirect those funds toward other essential needs like housing and utility bills.

**Reducing Administrative Waste:** The traditional "means-tested" application process is inefficient. School districts spend significant resources processing paperwork and chasing "meal debt"—debt that Senate Bill 586 would effectively eliminate for participating schools. Under this bill, local systems would report on outcomes and debt resolution, ensuring transparency and fiscal accountability.

Senate Bill 586 also plays another important role. Maryland's current meal system often inadvertently creates a two-tiered environment in our cafeterias. The stigma associated with qualifying for free or reduced-price meals (FARMS) prevents many eligible students from participating, leaving them to go through the school day hungry. Senate Bill 586 dismantles this barrier by moving toward a universal model. When every student eats for free, the cafeteria becomes a space of inclusion, rather than a reminder of economic status. Furthermore, because poverty is disproportionately concentrated in communities of color due to historical systemic disinvestment, this bill is a critical tool for advancing racial equity in Maryland's education system.

The \$10 million mandated annual appropriation starting in FY 2028 is a modest investment relative to the multi-billion-dollar Blueprint for Maryland's Future. Without addressing food insecurity, the state's other investments in tutoring, college readiness, and career counseling will yield lower returns. Investing in school nutrition is one of the most effective ways to close the achievement gap and support working families.

Senate Bill 586 is a common-sense solution to a persistent problem. It supports our students, helps our schools maximize federal funding, provides direct relief to families and ensures that Maryland's tax dollars are being used to support one of the most fundamental requirements for learning: nutrition. **For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy urges the committee to make a favorable report on Senate Bill 586.**

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## Equity Impact Analysis: Senate Bill 586

### *Bill summary*

Senate Bill 586 establishes a state-funded program to assist schools in participating in the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). The bill requires the State to pay the difference between federal reimbursement rates and the full cost of free meals for eligible schools. It prioritizes funding for schools with a high concentration of poverty and mandates an annual \$10 million appropriation starting in Fiscal Year 2028.

### *Background*

The federal CEP allows high-poverty schools to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students without individual applications. However, many eligible Maryland schools opt out because federal reimbursements don't always cover total operational costs. Senate Bill 586 aims to bridge this financial gap, ensuring that school meal debt, which often burdens low-income families is eliminated through systemic state support.

### *Equity Implications*

- By removing the "means test" at the individual level, the bill eliminates the stigma associated with free meals, ensuring that students from low-income backgrounds receive nutrition without social othering.
- The bill specifically instructs the Department of Education to consider geographic diversity, ensuring rural and under-resourced jurisdictions receive equitable access to the \$10 million fund.

- Given the historical correlation between systemic poverty and marginalized racial groups in Maryland, universal meal access disproportionately benefits Black and Latino students who statistically face higher rates of food insecurity.

*Impact*

Senate Bill 586 would likely **improve racial, social, and economic equity** in Maryland.

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<sup>1</sup> Maryland Food Bank. (2025). The Challenges of Child Hunger

# **SB586 Support (Written).pdf**

Uploaded by: Kenzie Funk

Position: FAV



**Testimony in SUPPORT of  
Senate Bill 586: Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment**

**Senate Budget and Taxation Committee**

**Position: Favorable**

February 25, 2026

At Strong Schools Maryland, we work to support the faithful implementation and full funding of the promises legislated through the landmark Blueprint for Maryland's Future. The Blueprint envisions a public education system where all students can feel safe and supported to learn and thrive in their school community. It was designed to specifically address systemic inequities that disproportionately impact historically marginalized communities. As a result, **Strong Schools Maryland offers favorable testimony in support of 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 play an important role in reducing childhood hunger and ensuring that students are ready to learn. We know that food security is necessary for children's psychological well being, physical health, and academic ability as hunger negatively impacts concentration, memory, and mood. However, too many children miss out on the benefits of school meals because of the current tiered payment structure, which requires a family of four to earn less than \$59,500 annually to qualify for no-cost meals.

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a federal program that allows high-poverty schools to serve free breakfast and lunch to *all* students, including in over 700 Maryland schools. 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>1</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>2</sup>. CEP has revolutionized children's access to healthy school meals by eliminating stigma for students, reducing barriers of cost and paperwork for families, and streamlining food service operations.

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

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<sup>1</sup> Hecht, A., Neff, R., Kelley, T., & Pollack Porter, K. (2021). Universal free schools 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>2</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.

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 is crucial to meeting students' needs. SB 586 would be an important stepping stone in Maryland's journey towards helping to reduce hunger, improve student health and academic performance, ease the financial burden on families already facing challenges, and achieve the vision of the Blueprint. Hungry kids can't wait.

**For these reasons, Strong Schools Maryland urges the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee to issue a favorable report on SB 586.**

**Please contact Kenzie Funk at [kenzie@strongschoolsmaryland.org](mailto:kenzie@strongschoolsmaryland.org) for additional questions.**

**Support AHA SB 586 CEP.pdf**

Uploaded by: Laura Hale

Position: FAV



February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2026

Testimony of Laura Hale  
American Heart Association

**Favorable SB 586 Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment**

Dear Chair Guzzone, Vice Chair Rosapepe, and Honorable Members of the Budget and Taxation Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before the committee today. The American Heart Association extends its strong support for SB 586 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 meals<sup>1</sup>. Research has also found that school meals are the healthiest meals that children receive each day<sup>2</sup>. 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 stigma<sup>3</sup> 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 performance<sup>4</sup>.” This meta-analysis also outlines positive association in BMI and possibly improves in household income particularly for low-income families<sup>5</sup>.

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

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<sup>1</sup> [School Nutrition Environment | Healthy Schools | CDC](#)

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

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

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

<sup>5</sup> [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 poverty<sup>6</sup>. 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 Senate Bill 586.

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

**SB586\_MSEA\_Lamb\_FAV.pdf**

Uploaded by: Lauren Lamb

Position: FAV

**FAVORABLE**  
**Senate Bill 586**  
**Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program - Establishment**

**Senate Budget & Taxation Committee**  
**February 25, 2026**

**Lauren Lamb**  
**Government Relations**

The Maryland State Education Association supports Senate Bill 586, which would establish the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Expansion Program to provide funding to schools that participate in the federal community eligibility provision for child nutrition programs. Beginning in fiscal year 2028 and each year thereafter, the Governor would be required to include \$10,000,000 in the annual budget bill for the program, which would bridge gaps in federal funding sources for schools and ensure that students can reliably access free school meals.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland's public schools, teaching and preparing our almost 900,000 students for the careers and jobs of the future. MSEA also represents 44 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3-million-member National Education Association (NEA).

Educators know well that school meals are often the primary source of nutritious meals for our students facing food insecurity. Children with inconsistent access to nutrition face real and lasting health impacts on their physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development, with consequences for their academic and behavioral outcomes.

This bill accounts for situations in which schools receive less federal funding through the CEP because they have fewer students identified as eligible for free meals. However, we know that identification rates are often not fully reflective of need within a school, as administrative barriers and delays in reporting can result in an undercount of students who would qualify for free meals. The program in this bill would ensure consistent funding for participating schools and therefore enhance schools' ability to provide all students with adequate nutrition. This effort complements the aims of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future and builds on years of work to provide targeted resources to students living in concentrated poverty.

**We urge the committee to issue a favorable report on Senate Bill 586.**

**SB 0586 Testimony pdf.pdf**

Uploaded by: Lesley Frost

Position: FAV

SB0586 - The Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment

Position - Favorable

February 23, 2026

To the honorable Chair and Members of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee.

My name is Lesley Frost and I am the Chair of National Council of Jewish Women, Maryland State Policy Advocacy Committee (NCJW MD SPA) and I am writing to express strong support for SB0586 – 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.

As a Jewish organization NCJW follows our tradition which clearly states that feeding the hungry is not optional. It is a mitzvah — a sacred obligation, and our support for HB 704 is also based on NCJW Resolution 11.5 “ Laws, policies, comprehensive supports, opportunities and services that enable all children and youth to succeed and thrive in school.”

School meals play an important role in reducing childhood hunger and ensuring that students are fed and ready to learn. However, too many children miss out on the benefits of school meals because of the current tiered payment structure, which requires a family of four to earn less than \$59,500 annually to qualify for no-cost meals. In addressing hunger in the school age population the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a proven solution. 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. 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.

However, 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.

To address these limitations and cuts in SNAP and Medicaid, SB0586 would, as outlined in the bill, establish a \$10 million state CEP supplement fund to 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 positively impact many students and their families. SB0586 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.

On behalf of the 600 NCJW advocates across the state, I ask the committee to make a favorable report on SB0586 - The Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment.

Sincerely,  
Lesley Frost  
Chair NCJW MD SPA, [ncjw.mdacts@gmail.com](mailto:ncjw.mdacts@gmail.com)  
7707 Wisconsin Avenue  
Bethesda MD 20814, [lesleyfrost0@gmail.com](mailto:lesleyfrost0@gmail.com)

# **SB0586 CEP Testimony.pdf**

Uploaded by: Lindsay Alemi

Position: FAV



## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 0586

### Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment

*Budget and Taxation and Senate Education, Energy, and Environment Committee*

February 23, 2026

The Anne Arundel County Food Bank (AACFB) strongly supports SB 0586 – 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.

The Anne Arundel County Food Bank provides critical resources, including food, baby supplies, and hygiene products, to a network of 76 Network Partners across Anne Arundel County. In FY25, we distributed over 4.5 million pounds of food and supplies, reaching over 577,000 individuals. The Community Eligibility Provision is an important pathway to Healthy School Meals for All - supporting students' academic achievement and healthy development. Even in wealthy Anne Arundel County, there are 47 designated Community Schools, reflecting the high rates of concentrated poverty. Across the county, the rate of students qualified for Free and Reduced Price Meals (FARMS) is 42%.

School meals play an important role in reducing childhood hunger and ensuring that students are fueled up and ready to learn. However, too many children miss out on the benefits of school meals because of the current tiered payment structure, which requires a family of four to earn less than \$59,500 annually to qualify for no-cost meals.

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>1</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>2</sup>.

Despite these benefits, not all schools can use CEP due to 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

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<sup>1</sup> Hecht, A., Neff, R., Kelley, T., & Pollack Porter, K. (2021). Universal free schools 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>2</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.



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 transformational for many students and their families. SB 0586 would be a critical next step 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 0586.**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Leah Paley".

Leah Aiello Paley, LMSW  
Chief Executive Officer  
Anne Arundel County Food Bank

**2-25-2026 SB 586-Community Eligibility Provision**

Uploaded by: Marcia Kingman

Position: FAV



## **TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE BUDGET AND TAXATION COMMITTEE**

### **SB 586-Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program—Establishment**

**POSITION: Support**

**BY: Linda Kohn, LWVMD President**

**DATE: February 25, 2026**

The League of Women Voters at the national, state, and local levels have long-established public policy positions that derive from the Leagues' fundamental position that "the needs of children are a high priority of government." And if a federal welfare program does not achieve "an adequate level of benefits, some states will need to supplement federal payments." Maryland's League of Women Voters supports SB 586 1) because the bill recognizes that the limitations on the current federal CEP reimbursement structure prevents some schools from offering free breakfast and lunch to all of its students; and 2) because of recent cuts to SNAP and Medicaid at the federal level, the number of students who are able to directly certify for free school meals is threatened.

The intention of SB 586 to establish a \$10 million state Community Eligibility Provision supplement fund would protect the financial sustainability of the program in existing CEP schools as well as making the program possible in other Maryland schools. Expanding the number of CEP schools in Maryland would help support struggling families who are fighting inflationary food prices and wrestling with meeting the basic needs of the family.

That children need enough healthy food to be attentive and active students is a truth universally acknowledged. The League supports the State's responsibility to provide funding to high poverty schools and school districts using CEP to provide free meals to all students.

The League of Women Voters of Maryland, representing over 2,000 Marylanders, urges a favorable report on SB 586.

**SB 586 - CEP - PSSAM - FAV.pdf**

Uploaded by: Mary Pat Fannon

Position: FAV



Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director  
1217 S. Potomac Street  
Baltimore, MD 21224  
410-935-7281  
marypat.fannon@pssam.org

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BILL: SB 586  
TITLE: Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment  
DATE: February 25, 2026  
POSITION: Favorable  
COMMITTEE: Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee  
Senate Budget and Taxation Committee  
CONTACT: Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director

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The Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM), on behalf of all twenty-four Maryland local school superintendents, **supports** Senate Bill 586.

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 SB 586.

**MD CEP Expansion Testimony\_Feb 2026\_SB586.pdf**

Uploaded by: Meghan Maroney

Position: FAV



February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 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,<sup>i</sup> and the Maryland Cares for Kids Act of 2018 ensures any child eligible for free or reduced-price meals receives a free meal.<sup>ii</sup> 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.<sup>iii</sup> 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.<sup>iv</sup> 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.<sup>v</sup>

## **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.<sup>vi</sup> 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.



Meghan Maroney  
Campaign Manager, Federal Child Nutrition Programs  
Center for Science in the Public Interest

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<sup>i</sup> 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.

<sup>ii</sup> Maryland Cares for Kids Act. H.B. 315. 2018.

<sup>iii</sup> 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](https://www.childnourishlab.org/_files/ugd/383bcd_45ee5fed8e224ffd8639f0f498086e31.pdf). Accessed February 9, 2026.

<sup>iv</sup> 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.

<sup>v</sup> 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.

<sup>vi</sup> 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.

**SB0586 - WrittenTestimony\_MdPHA\_Support\_2.23.26.p**

Uploaded by: Oluwatosin Olateju

Position: FAV



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

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**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.<sup>1</sup>

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

From a public health and economic perspective, school meal programs are among the most effective upstream interventions available.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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>

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

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

<sup>4</sup> 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.

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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.

**Maryland Public Health Association (MdPHA)**

**PO Box 7045 · 6801 Oak Hall Ln · Columbia, MD 21045-9998**

**GetInfo@MdPHA.org [www.mdpha.org](http://www.mdpha.org) 443.475.0242**

**racine\_testimony\_SB586 (1).pdf**

Uploaded by: Paige Racine

Position: FAV

SB 586 - FAV

Dear Chair Guzzone, Vice Chair Rosapepe, and members of the Budget and Taxation Committee,

My name is Paige Racine. I am a student at the University of Maryland and an intern here at the Maryland General Assembly. While I am writing in a personal capacity to express my strong support for SB 586 and to share my experience as a graduate of a Cecil County public school, in the interest of full transparency I am currently interning for Delegate Palakovich Carr—her work on this issue was a big reason why I was interested in working for her office.

From my first year of middle school to my final year of high school, I was in the same building with most of the same people, but my junior year was unique in two respects: it was the first time my school was enrolled in the CEP Program, and it was the first year since the 6th grade that one of my best friends was able to eat lunch at school.

Despite easily qualifying, his parents never filled out the necessary forms for free lunch, and as a result, the only way he was able to have anything to eat was to walk the cafeteria and ask around to see if anybody had leftovers they were willing to give him. He tried to play it off—it was routine for him to stand up and make a joke about panhandling before leaving our table to go scrounge for food—but we went to a very small school, and it was easy to see that it was embarrassing for everyone to know his family couldn't afford to buy lunch.

His experience was not unique—I distinctly remember noticing how many more of my peers were eating breakfast and lunch when it became available to all students at no cost. And while I typically brought my own lunch to school, if I had forgotten my food from home I was able to quickly receive a school lunch without having to worry about the amount of money in my account, where ordinarily I would either have to call home and ask my parents to deposit money in my account, or just go hungry.

I want to reiterate just how quick and simple the CEP program made receiving school meals. People received their lunches much quicker without having to worry about prices and insufficient account balances, and free breakfast meant those who had a late lunch period wouldn't have to wait until 1 p.m. for their first meal. And because everyone had access to the same meal, there was no stigma for those who qualified for free and reduced price lunches, and parents did not have to fill out invasive forms so that their children were able to eat with their peers.

School is difficult enough on its own—Maryland students do not need hunger as an additional obstacle to successful learning. SB 586 will allow students to focus more on their academics and less on where their next meal will come from. Thank you for the opportunity to express my strong support for SB 586, and I once again urge you to support this essential legislation.

# **Agudah Testimony - CEP Expansion Senate - SB 586 -**

Uploaded by: Rabbi Ariel Sadwin

Position: FAV



**SENATE BUDGET AND TAXATION COMMITTEE**

**FEBRUARY 25, 2026**

**SENATE BILL 586**

**COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION EXPANSION PROGRAM – ESTABLISHMENT  
SUPPORT**

Agudath Israel of Maryland, the Mid-Atlantic regional office of Agudath Israel of America, a renowned national Jewish advocacy organization with chapters across the country, speaks on behalf of the Orthodox Jewish communities across Maryland and on the behalf of the many Jewish schools and students within our state. We stand today in support of Senate Bill 586.

SB 586 would complement federal funds from the Community Eligibility Provision of the Child Nutrition Programs by providing additional funding for student meals. The funds would be dispensed through county boards, based on the concentration of poverty in public schools and would consider geographic diversity in determining funding prioritization.

Food insecurity has become a growing concern in efforts to improve the well-being of vulnerable Maryland residents. It impacts families as a whole, with children and young adults experiencing the most severe effects. When students lack proper nutrition, they are more likely to face challenges emotionally, academically, and physically. Research consistently shows that school food programs can lead to better outcomes in various aspects of life. Furthermore, these programs help ease the financial strain on parents who are already struggling to provide for their families.

Our schools are, sadly, no less familiar with student nutrition challenges and food insecurity than other schools are. Many of our schools participate in the CEP, and this bill would help us move closer to ensuring that all students are able to thrive by receiving the nutrition they need to succeed.

We therefore ask that you issue a favorable report on Senate Bill 586. Thank you very much.

**SB 586 - State Board & MSDE - Support.docx.pdf**

Uploaded by: Richard Kinkaid

Position: FAV

**TO:** Senate Budget and Taxation Committee

**BILL:** Senate Bill (SB) 586 – Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment

**DATE:** February 25, 2026

**POSITION:** Support

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The Maryland State Board of Education (State Board) and the State Department of Education (MSDE) provide this letter of support for **Senate Bill 586 – Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment**. This bill establishes the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Expansion Program within MSDE to provide funding to eligible public and non-public schools (also known as local education agencies or LEAs) that participate in CEP under the federal child nutrition programs.

The CEP Program eliminates the need for household meal applications and ensures that students have access to school meals at no cost, regardless of individual income. To elect CEP, LEAs must meet a minimum Identified Student Percentage (ISP) threshold of 25 percent, either at the individual school level or through grouping schools. Identified students include those directly certified through Medicaid, TANF, SNAP, and other qualifying programs. In School Year 2025–2026, more than 700 Maryland schools participate in CEP across 24 public and 18 non-public LEAs. Of those, 11 LEAs (five public and six non-public) now operate at a 100% CEP claiming percentage, meaning all meals are reimbursed at the federal free rate.

Under CEP, the amount schools are reimbursed by the federal government depends on their ISP rate. Schools with higher percentages of identified students receive a greater share of their meal reimbursements at the federal free rate. Schools with 62% or more identified students qualify as “100% CEP,” meaning all meals are reimbursed at the free rate.

For schools below that 62% threshold, only a portion of meals are reimbursed at the higher free rate, and the remaining meals are reimbursed at a lower paid rate, even though all students eat at no cost. As a result, LEAs must use state or local funds to make up the difference between federal reimbursements and the actual cost of providing meals.

SB 586 is intended to help close this funding gap. If enacted, this funding would provide short-term financial relief to LEAs whose federal reimbursements do not fully cover their meal program costs. While many LEAs maximize reimbursements by grouping schools strategically, MSDE estimates that the proposed \$10 million annual appropriation would last just under five months. This estimate is based on an analysis of October 2025 breakfast and lunch claims for participating CEP schools that are not 100% CEP.

MSDE supports the concept of expanding CEP. In lieu of universal meals, CEP is critical to ensuring more Maryland students receive free school meals. Due to the unknown impact of recent cuts to federal programs that facilitate direct certification for free meals, CEP is a lifeline for ensuring food security among school-aged children. MSDE recognizes that access to consistent, nutritious meals is foundational to student success. Food

security is directly linked to improved academic performance, stronger attendance, enhanced concentration, and better behavioral outcomes.

MSDE recognizes the State's current fiscal climate and the need to balance competing budget priorities. While we strongly support the expansion of the Community Eligibility Provision as an effective strategy to advance student food security and academic success, we acknowledge that implementation must be considered within available State resources. MSDE supports the expansion of CEP when resources allow and remains committed to working with the General Assembly to identify sustainable funding solutions that advance student well-being while maintaining fiscal responsibility.

The State Board and the Department request that the Committee consider this information as it deliberates **SB 586**. For further information, please contact Laurel Cratsley, Interim Executive Director of Government Affairs at [Laurel.Cratsley@maryland.gov](mailto:Laurel.Cratsley@maryland.gov).

# **SB 586 - Support - CEP Program Expansion.pdf**

Uploaded by: Sam Mathias

Position: FAV

**BILL:** Senate Bill 586  
**TITLE:** Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program - Establishment  
**HEARING DATE:** February 25, 2026  
**POSITION:** SUPPORT  
**COMMITTEE:** Budget and Taxation / Education, Energy, and the Environment  
**CONTACT:** Sam Mathias, Legal & Policy Director ([smathias@mabe.org](mailto:smathias@mabe.org))

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE), representing all of the State's local boards of education, **supports Senate Bill 586, Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment.** This bill aligns with MABE's longstanding resolution to support student health and fitness and preserving the ability of local school systems to participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) program. Ensuring that students have consistent access to nutritious meals during the school day is foundational to academic success, attendance, and student well-being, and it is one of the most basic moral requirements of a civilized society.

Senate Bill 586 provides State funding to help cover the difference between the federal paid reimbursement rate and the federal free reimbursement rate for meals served under the CEP. By narrowing this gap, the bill strengthens the fiscal sustainability of universal meal programs and enables more schools to participate without compromising local budgets.

While we strongly support the establishment of this program, we respectfully note that the proposed \$10 million annual allocation is unlikely to fully meet statewide needs. The blended federal reimbursement structure under CEP can leave participating schools absorbing a portion of meal costs, particularly in schools with lower identified student percentages. State support meaningfully reduces that burden, though it may not eliminate it entirely.

Beyond reimbursement mechanics, CEP delivers substantial educational and equity benefits. It allows schools to provide breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost and eliminates the need for individual household meal applications. This reduces administrative burden, eliminates stigma, and ensures that families do not incur school meal debt.

However, when a school adopts CEP, it stops collecting federal meal applications. Those free and reduced-price meal applications have historically been used as a proxy poverty measure for many other essential public school benefits, including:

- State compensatory education funding;

- Federal Title I allocations;
- Accountability subgroup reporting (for federal disaggregated achievement data); and
- Other benefit programs (E-Rate discounts, after-school programs, other federal grant applications, etc.).

In the absence of direct certification for free and reduced-price meal applications, we are very likely undercounting students experiencing economic hardship. This has both state and federal benefit impacts, including an impact on compensatory education funding under the Blueprint. While MABE fully supports the program in this bill, we do want to very clearly note the increasing concern of an unreliable statewide methodology for counting students in poverty in CEP schools. Strengthening reimbursement through Senate Bill 586 helps mitigate fiscal pressure in CEP schools but resolving the broader poverty-counting challenge remains essential to ensuring equitable resource allocation.

Senate Bill 586 takes an important step toward strengthening access to universal school meals, and we appreciate the opportunity this discussion provides to raise the related issue of poverty measurement in CEP schools. For these reasons, **MABE supports Senate Bill 586 and respectfully requests a favorable report.**

# **Testimony SB 586 Community Eligibility Provision.p**

Uploaded by: Dawana Sterrette

Position: FWA

**Testimony of the  
Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners  
Support with Amendment  
Senate Bill 586 - Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment**

**February 25, 2026**

The Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners supports the federal Community Eligibility Provision program because it allows us to feed all of our students. The Baltimore City Public School System was the first LEA in Maryland to enter this program.

This legislation establishes the Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program that requires the state to pay the difference between the federal paid reimbursement and the federal free reimbursement rate to those schools and districts that participate in the CEP program. Furthermore, it requires the Governor to set aside \$10 million for the program.

There is a need for a universal feeding bill that would cover all students in the State. This bill is a step in the right direction, but there is a need to provide more funding that would feed all students. While we do not know the exact amount of funding required, based on feedback from the school systems Food and Nutrition Department and being in discussion with other LEAs, it appears that \$10 million would be insufficient to fully fund all CEP-eligible schools in Maryland. This shortfall would create several challenges. Although it may expand access for some schools, it would continue to place school systems, particularly school nutrition departments, in the very difficult position of determining which “eligible” schools could participate and which could not.

The Board understands the fiscal issues that face this State. However, this bill could be used to initially start the process and additional funding could be added over the incoming years.

For the foregoing reasons, the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners supports with amendment SB 586 and urges a favorable report with an amendment to increase funding.

Dawana Merritt Sterrette, Esq.  
Executive Director, Legislative and Government Affairs  
Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners  
443-250-0190

**MD Catholic Conference\_SB 586\_FWA.pdf**

Uploaded by: Garrett O'Day

Position: FWA



MARYLAND  
CATHOLIC  
CONFERENCE

February 25, 2026

SB 586

**Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment**

**Senate Budget & Taxation Committee**

**Senate Education, Energy & the Environment Committee**

**Position: FAVORABLE w/ Amendment**

The Maryland Catholic Conference offers this testimony in support of Senate Bill 586, with amendment. The Catholic Conference is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals and numerous charities combine to form our state's second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government. We also offer this testimony on behalf of the families of approximately 50,000 students served by over 150 PreK-12 Catholic schools in Maryland, as well as the one in every eight Maryland students educated in a nonpublic school, particularly those whose schools participate in the Federal School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program.

Senate Bill 586 would allow schools participating in the Federal School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program, which currently includes participating nonpublic schools such as the Archdiocese of Baltimore Community Schools in Baltimore City among others, to feed all students a free breakfast or lunch, respectively. The bill would allow the State to subsidize the cost of the free meals not provided through federal funding for both programs. Participating schools would not be authorized to charge any student for meals under either program. **As this bill does require nonpublic schools to maximize the use of available state and federal funds to carry out the program, we respectfully request a clarifying amendment that adds “AND PARTICIPATING NONPUBLIC SCHOOLS” after “PUBLIC SCHOOLS” on page 2, line 12.**

Although Maryland is one of the wealthiest states in the country, one in eight households in Maryland face constant food insecurity. Sadly, children and adolescents are not exempt from that statistic. School breakfast and lunch programs are essential to not only ending hunger, but for improving the health and educational outcomes of students who live with food insecurity.

Our nonpublic schools that serve low-income students often operate on very tight budgets. Thus, some that would like to participate in the Community Eligibility Provision Program cannot, due to an inability to afford the cost gap in their school budgets that it would entail. This legislation might allow more schools to participate in that program and, thus, more kids to be fed, alleviating the burden on parents. Well over 100,000 meals are currently served annually to low-income students in nonpublic schools through these federal programs. This bill purports to ensure that all students in the State of Maryland whose schools participate in the free feeding programs are provided completely free breakfast and lunch, regardless of federal funding limitations. It is for these reasons that the Maryland Catholic Conference asks for a favorable report for Senate Bill 586, with amendment.

## **Amendment to Senate Bill 586**

### **Amendment No. 1**

**On Page 2, Line 12, after “COUNTY BOARDS”, insert “AND PARTICIPATING NONPUBLIC SCHOOLS”.**

# **DBM LOC SB586 Community Eligibility Provision Exp**

Uploaded by: Dana Phillips

Position: UNF

WES MOORE  
*Governor*

ARUNA MILLER  
*Lieutenant Governor*



YAAKOV "JAKE" WEISSMANN  
*Secretary*

MARC L. NICOLE  
*Deputy Secretary*

**TITLE: SB586 Community Eligibility Provisions Expansion Program Establishment**

**DATE: February 25th 2026**

**COMMITTEE: Budget and Taxation**

**POSITION: Letter of Concern**

**SUMMARY OF BILL:** The bill establishes a Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Expansion Program that would be administered by the Maryland State Department of Education. The program would provide funding to eligible schools that participate in the federal CEP.

**EXPLANATION:** This legislation establishes a mandated appropriation, increasing general fund expenditures by \$10 million annually beginning in FY28, and specifies that the State, counties, and schools maximize the use of all available funds. This program requires the State to pay the difference between the federal paid reimbursement rate and the federal free reimbursement rate for schools that participate in the community eligibility provision of child nutrition programs.

Given the significant uncertainty in federal policy and the escalating fiscal shortfalls forecasted through Fiscal Year 2028, the Department urges caution against legislation that increases expenditures or diverts revenue without sustainable funding offsets. In light of the current fiscal crisis, the State must remain disciplined and strategic in its funding decisions to protect essential services for all Marylanders.

**For additional information, contact Dana Phillips at**

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<http://dbm.maryland.gov>

WES MOORE  
*Governor*

ARUNA MILLER  
*Lieutenant Governor*



# Maryland

DEPARTMENT OF BUDGET  
AND MANAGEMENT

YAAKOV "JAKE" WEISSMANN  
*Secretary*

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*Deputy Secretary*

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