

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB0557

Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion

Senate Budget & Taxation Committee

February 22, 2023

Good Afternoon, my name is Megan Doran and I am the Director of Food Services for St. Mary's County Public School. I am also the current President of The Maryland School Nutrition Association (MdSNA). MdSNA has a total of 21 active chapters that represent hundreds of individuals who have made it their life's work to feed students healthy and nutritious meals to support learning. I am here today to express my strong support and that of the Maryland School Nutrition Association for SB0557 for Universal Free Meals for all students in Maryland.

Recent studies document that access to nutritious meals in school increases the health and educational outcomes for our students. Investing in these programs to ensure all children, regardless of income, can access healthy meals would ensure that every child is ready to learn and thrive. This Bill would allow Maryland School Districts to focus on providing the healthiest and most appealing meals possible instead of spending resources processing applications and completing other administrative work. This bill would eliminate unpaid school meals fees and the stigmatizing practices that have been linked to school meals debt. Currently, only students from homes with incomes below 130 percent of the poverty line are eligible for free school meals. Many struggling families do not qualify for free school meals. Offering free meals to all students eliminates the cost barrier for children whose families' income is near the cutoff to receive free school meals. By having every student participate in school meals, this bill would eliminate the stigma some children fear of being labeled "poor" by their classmates.

I could sit here and dump more statistics and information that most of us are already aware of or I can ask you to think about being a high school student. This particular previously "free" high school student who typically hasn't eaten breakfast or lunch at school for fear of being labeled "poor" by their peers was able to eat breakfast and lunch during the pandemic without the feeling of being labeled. Now imagine being a middle school student that didn't qualify in the past and still doesn't even though their parents lost their job but for the last two years they have been able to eat free breakfast and lunch to help eliminate some of the food bill burden for their parents who are trying to figure it out. Or perhaps the elementary student that gets prepackaged items from the line so that they can take food home for their siblings who are not school aged. Fast forward to today, the "free student" is now a "poor kid again" in the mind of that student. The student whose parents still haven't found a job that generates the same income as before is struggling with hunger pains because they dare not go into the lunch line because they know there is no money on their account and no food at home. The student who took food home for their siblings now has nothing to give. These are real scenarios that I have seen first hand.

In St. Mary's County the Free and Reduced Meal Percentage has increased from 32% pre-pandemic to 40% as of October 31 this school year. That is roughly 1400 more students qualified for free meals this school year. However, our average daily participation is down 10% from last year. The need is still there but the stigma has returned. How many students are going hungry? How many students are struggling to focus in class? How long is Maryland going to turn the other cheek and pretend that this isn't happening to one of our most vulnerable populations? My hope is not much longer. I ask that you support SB0557, to support all Maryland students.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB0557 on behalf of the Maryland School Nutrition Association. We urge your favorable support.

