

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 628

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

House Ways and Means Committee

February 22, 2023

Good Afternoon. My name is Mary Klatko, and I am the Legislative Chairperson for the Maryland School Nutrition Association. I am here today to express our strong support for HB 628.

This legislation's purpose is to provide healthy, nutritious school breakfast and lunch to all students in every grade in all schools in Maryland because no child can learn without good nutrition. When feeling hungry they lose concentration, and sadly many cannot afford to buy meals at school or even bring a sandwich from home.

Schools are trying to show students that they are equal, that they all receive the same support for their education, such as transportation, teachers, books, temperature-controlled classrooms, and ipads but most noticeably missing for too many is the benefit of nutritious meals. That's where our students are treated differently based on their family's socioeconomic situation, and that is not right or acceptable. We place students into the categories of paid, free or reduced price instead of based on accomplishments.

Maryland has been a national leader in combating childhood hunger for decades such as:

- In 1998 launching the free statewide school breakfast program known as Maryland Meals for Achievement
- In 2018 the Maryland Cares for Kids Act eliminated reduced price meal payments by students.

This state has demonstrated a commitment to student health time and again.

The federal government provided school meals free every day all during the pandemic to all students through our school system programs and then abruptly closed them this school year.

Many parents do not complete the application for free or reduced-price meals mostly due to embarrassment. Food and Nutrition Service Programs are accumulating debt at an astronomical rate. Five months into this school year, the statewide amount of debt for meals in Maryland is 1.7 million dollars. Where is that money to come from? The School Food and Nutrition Service Programs, with a few exceptions, are enterprise funds which means they are not part of the General Fund Operating Budget. They stand alone.

This bill is the answer to:

- the nutritional needs of our students, as well as
- support for the educational process, and
- financial balance for the Food & Nutrition Service Programs.

Current Research Reviews have found that Universal Free School Meals are associated with

- increased participation
- improved diet quality

- either no change or improved BMI (Body Mass Index)

Maryland is not alone in facing this need. The National Conference of State Legislatures reported last summer that 17 states have considered or passed legislation for Universal Free School Meals. In 2023, Montana and Washington, DC have begun to pursue this legislation along with Maryland.

We are very hopeful that you will see the value in supporting all Maryland students with a nutritious breakfast and lunch in school every day to give them:

- the opportunity to learn and succeed not only in school but in life as well and
- to grow healthy and strong through good nutrition

I have attached the following:

- USDA Meal Pattern Nutritional Requirements for School Breakfast and Lunch
- colorful page of what school meals look like
- 2022 State Legislative Summary

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. The Maryland School Nutrition Association urges your favorable support for HB 628.