



Maryland Senate Bill 971

Education - Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program

School Lunch Position: **Favorable w/ Amendment**

Maryland has been a national leader in combating childhood hunger for decades. From launching the free, statewide school breakfast program, Maryland Meals for Achievement (MMFA), in 1998 to eliminating reduced-price meals in the 2018 Maryland Cares for Kids Act¹, the State has demonstrated a commitment to student health time and again. Even as we grappled with the onset of a global pandemic, Maryland enhanced students' access to healthy school meals through the 2020 Student Meal Programs and Meal Charge Policy, which prohibits lunch shaming in every school across the State. The Maryland School Nutrition Association (MdSNA) is proud to collaborate with local and statewide partners to ensure students have access to nutritious school meals. As such, we eagerly support the State's adoption of fully funded, free meals for all students, assuming Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) retain community-driven control over program operations.

As written, Senate Bill (SB) 971 does not serve all Maryland students. For fiscal year 2022, nearly 700,000 students would not have access to state-supported, universal free meals². With increasing inflation, gas prices and expenses to a household, the MdSNA is concerned about those students who may be facing hidden poverty. More than 1,000 Maryland schools would not be eligible to receive SB 971 funding, and thus unable to provide universal meals at no cost to students. This inequity within and between districts creates unnecessary operational hardships, while exacerbating the imbalance of available services for students in need.

School Food and Nutrition (FNS) Departments are designed to be self-sustaining enterprises. According to federal research, the cost to produce a school lunch in 2014 was \$3.81, while the federal free reimbursement was only \$3.32³. The average FNS Department's revenues met only 97% of operational

¹ Full implementation of the 2018 Maryland Cares for Kids Act, including elimination of reduced-price school meals, does not go into effect until 2023.

² For fiscal year 2022, a public school eligible for the per pupil grant must have at least an 80% poverty level.

³ Hanson, Melanie. "School Lunch Debt" EducationData.org, October 12, 2021, <https://educationdata.org/school-lunch-debt>.

costs⁴. Since that study, costs have continued to increase at rates that exceed federal subsidy. Oftentimes, when FNS Departments incur financial losses, the district must pull monies from its general fund, potentially jeopardizing wraparound services and resources necessary for students' educational development. The MdSNA is calling on the General Assembly to clearly delineate the per meal funding that will be provided to LEAs for providing healthy meals at no cost to all students. We ask the State to provide public school funding equal to the difference between the federal reimbursement for a free lunch and the full price paid lunch.

Lastly, SB 971 requires an LEA to apply for and participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). The CEP-eligible schools that are currently not participating have done extensive analysis on current and projected participation, operational and financial feasibility, impact on educational aid, and community support. While already serving a significant proportion of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals, most of these schools welcome the opportunity to offer all students meals at no cost. However, achieving universal school meals through CEP would be detrimental, not only to FNS operations, but to the school's Title I and Compensatory Education operations as well. The MdSNA wants to feed all students; we do not want to do so at the loss of other vital services, such as after school enrichment, community engagement opportunities or educational resources. Therefore, if a school will lose funding in Title I or Compensatory Education aid, federal meal reimbursement, or via other revenue sources, the MdSNA requests an exemption from the CEP requirement.

In conclusion, the MdSNA supports a fully funded, universal meal program for all students, if LEAs retain operational autonomy. Schools provide transportation and Chromebooks to students at no cost. Shouldn't healthy meals be the same?

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mary Klatko

MdSNA Legislative Chair

⁴ US Department of Agriculture. "The Cost of Producing School Meals Has Increased" June 2021, https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNMCS_infographic4_CostofProducingSchoolMeals.pdf.