



Maryland Hunger Solutions

Ending hunger and promoting well-being

**Testimony in Support of SB334
The Hunger Free Schools Act
House Appropriations Committee
February 25, 2015**

Maryland Hunger Solutions supports SB1334, which alters a certain definition for certain fiscal years to determine the number of students used to calculate a certain grant for schools that participate in a certain federal program; providing for the application of this Act; and generally relating to the compensatory education grant for primary and secondary education.

Senate Bill 334 aids families in Maryland struggling to feed their children. As Maryland families continue to struggle against stagnant wages, diminishing government supports, and rising costs of living, they need the federal child nutrition programs more and more to help stretch their limited resources and ensure their children can succeed in school. More than one in eight households in Maryland struggled with hunger on average in the years 2010-2012, according to the most recent data released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service in its annual report on food insecurity. For families with children, that number climbs even higher. Food hardship data collected by Gallup for the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) reports that one in five parents said they had trouble putting food on the table over the last 12 months. By making school meals free for all students and an integral part of the learning environment, high-poverty schools support healthier students, better academic outcomes, and the elimination of childhood hunger. It is vital that high-poverty schools implement strategies to offer “universal” free school meals to remove the many barriers to participation, including stigma that the programs are only for poor children, as well as administrative and financial obstacles.

Available to Maryland schools at the start of the 2013-2014 school year, the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) presents a tremendous opportunity to expand access to school meals in our most vulnerable communities. The goal of this legislation is to hold school districts harmless with regards to qualifying for State Compensatory Funding based on FARMS forms alone, therefore encouraging more school districts to consider implementing the CEP program.

Senate Bill 334 helps ensure children receive the nutrition they need to succeed in school. We all know that hungry children cannot learn and have trouble behaving in class. Research shows that not only is a nourished child a better learner, but she is also a better test-taker and participant in school – more likely to be at school, arrive on time, behave, and be attentive in class.¹ Children experiencing hunger have been found to have lower math scores and be more likely to repeat a grade.² Teens experiencing hunger are more likely to have been suspended from school and have difficulty getting along with other students.³

¹ Murphy JM. “Breakfast and Learning: An Updated Review.” *Journal of Current Nutrition and Food Science* 2007; 3(1): 3-36.

² Alaimo K, Olson CM, Frongillo EA Jr. “Food Insufficiency and American School-Aged Children’s Cognitive, Academic and Psychosocial Development.” *Pediatrics* 2001; 108(1):44-53.

³ Id.

The nutrient-rich foods provided through the school meal programs, which are subject to federal nutrition standards, also can help reduce the risk of obesity. A nationally representative study found that school breakfast participation was associated with a significantly lower body mass index (BMI, an indicator of excess body fat).⁴ Further, school meal participants are less likely to have nutrient inadequacies, and are more likely to consume fruit, vegetables, and milk at breakfast and lunch.⁵

Many of these positive impacts are particularly pronounced in the School Breakfast Program, which is underutilized, with only 59.9 percent of the low-income students in Maryland who eat school lunch each day also receiving a school breakfast.⁶ When schools offer all children breakfast at no charge, it decreases food insecurity and creates an equal playing field where all children have the same opportunity to start their school day well nourished.⁷ Schools that offer universal free meals have higher breakfast participation, especially when breakfast is served in the classroom, resulting in more students consuming a nutritionally substantive breakfast.⁸

Senate Bill 334 helps reduce barriers to school meals participation. CEP helps solve many of the barriers that impede participation. It allows schools to offer free meals to all students and incorporates administrative simplifications, which enable high-poverty schools to stop collecting fees from students and still cover their costs with the federal reimbursements. Key to these simplifications is the elimination of school meal applications, which can be confusing for families and burdensome for schools to collect and process.

Under CEP, schools are reimbursed for meals served based on the number students identified through data matching, as opposed to household school meal applications. Direct certification through data matching is a highly accurate means of identifying children eligible for free school meals because households have already undergone a significant income verification process to receive SNAP or other benefits.⁹ In many states that have made investments to develop a strong direct certification system, including Maryland, virtually all low-income children in SNAP households are certified for free school meals, boosting the efficiency and accuracy of certifications among all students.¹⁰

⁴ Gleason, P. M. & Dodd, A. H. (2009). School breakfast program but not school lunch program participation is associated with lower body mass index. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 109(2 Supplement 1), S118-S128.

⁵ Clark, M. A. & Fox, M. K. (2009). Nutritional quality of the diets of U.S. public school children and the role of the school meal programs. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 109(2 Supplement 1), S44-S56.

⁶ Food Research and Action Center, School Breakfast Scorecard: 2013-2014 School Year, http://frac.org/pdf/School_Breakfast_Scorecard_SY_2013_2014.pdf

⁷ Bartfeld, J. S. & Ahn, H. M. (2011). The School Breakfast Program strengthens household food security among low-income households with elementary school children. *Journal of Nutrition*, 141(3), 470-475.

⁸ Crepinsek MK, Singh A, Bernstein LS, McLaughlin JE. "Dietary Effects of Universal-Free School Breakfast: Finding from the Evaluation of the School Breakfast Program Pilot Project." *Journal American Dietetic Association* 2006; 106(11):1796-1803.

⁹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis. Analysis of Verification Summary Data, School Year 2008-2009. Dennis Ranalli, Edward Harper, and Jay Hirschman, Alexandria, VA, March 2011. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/MENU/Published/CNP/FILES/VerificationSummaryReport.pdf>

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis, "Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: State Implementation Progress, School Year 2011-2012, Report to Congress" by Quinn Moore, Kevin Conway, and Brandon Kyler. Project Officer Dennis Ranalli. Report CN-12-DC. Alexandria, VA: October 2012. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/MENU/Published/CNP/cnp.htm>

CEP is a proven success in the first states to implement it, since the 2011-2012 school year. There have been no reports of school districts losing either general education funding or food service revenue, and virtually no schools have dropped community eligibility after adopting it. Schools participating in CEP for two years in Illinois, Kentucky, and Michigan increased average daily participation in the National School Lunch Program by 13 percent and average daily participation in the School Breakfast Program by 25 percent.¹¹ As a result of the initial success of CEP, more and more schools have come into the program. In these three states, the number of schools participating nearly doubled in the second year, increasing from 665 schools in the 2011-2012 school year to 1,240 schools in the 2012-2013 school year.¹² For example, Chicago Public Schools started with 100 buildings in their first year of implementation, and based on their positive experience, more than doubled that number in their second year to 240 buildings.

In many states, programs unrelated to the school meal programs utilize school meal eligibility data as a proxy for the number of low-income children in a school or district, generally to provide additional aid for low-income children as we do here in Maryland. The perceived need for this data need not stand in the way of allowing schools to implement community eligibility. At the federal level, the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Agriculture worked together to address the policy issues of eliminating the school meal applications and stakeholders in the phase-in states have been able to work collaboratively to identify solutions at the state and local level.¹³

Both our neighboring state of West Virginia and the District of Columbia have successfully implemented CEP in many schools, without a detrimental impact on education funding. Schools are allowed to use their claiming percentage under community eligibility as a proxy for school meal application data for the purposes of Title I allocations, tracking educational outcomes, and for determining eligibility for financial assistance with school fees at the local building level.

We applaud the Maryland General Assembly for taking steps to create flexibility in the State Code to enable schools to eliminate school meal applications through implementation of the CEP, without the fear of losing state education funding. This is essential to enabling additional Maryland schools to adopt the program. We support Senate Bill 334 to create these needed changes which will allow schools to move forward now, while more time is taken to develop a long term solution.

Maryland is a national leader in public education excellence. Strong implementation of the federal school nutrition programs supports these efforts, and protects our state investments. We are confident that with the support of this legislation in the General Assembly, MSDE and the local education agencies can implement effective policy solutions that allow for implementation of the Community Eligibility Provision so that all of our children thrive and so that our schools reach their goals.

Respectfully submitted,



Michael J. Wilson, Director

¹¹ Levin, M. and Z. Neuberger, "Community Eligibility: Making High-Poverty Schools Hunger Free" (Oct. 2013) http://frac.org/pdf/community_eligibility_report_2013.pdf

¹² Id.

¹³ U.S. Department of Education, Guidance: The Community Eligibility Provision and Selected Requirements Under Title I, January 2014. <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/13-0381guidance.doc>

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