



Maryland Hunger Solutions

Ending hunger and promoting well-being

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 755

The Free Schools Meals for Students from Low and Middle-Income Families Act
Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
March 15, 2016

Nearly a decade ago, Maryland Hunger Solutions was founded with one simple goal—to end hunger in the state of Maryland. Since that time, Maryland Hunger Solutions has worked tirelessly to highlight the challenges of hunger and food insecurity, or the lack of reliable access to healthy food faced by our state’s most vulnerable residents. We advocate to improve, strengthen and expand access to existing federal and state nutrition programs, such as school meals, and we strive to improve public policies to better address the needs of people living in poverty. Senate Bill 755 does just that – it increases access to school meals for more than 45,000 children statewide.

The cornerstones of the federal child nutrition programs are the National School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program—proven strategies to reduce food insecurity, support health, and provide critical nutrition supports to low-income families. In the current 2015-2016 school year, nearly half of all enrolled children (approximately 400,000 students), qualify for free or reduced-price school meals due low household income.¹

While the majority of these students qualify for free school meals, more than **45,000** are currently eligible for reduced-price meals. Families who qualify for reduced-price meals have incomes that fall between 130%-185% of the federal poverty level. To illustrate what this looks like at the household level, a single parent with one child earning between \$20,449 and \$29,101 a year qualifies for reduced-priced school meals. With incomes this low, many reduced-price eligible students go hungry because their parents cannot afford the cost of school meals. In fact, reduced-price eligible students are **26% less likely to eat school meals**, compared to students that qualify for free school meals (Source: MSDE meal data for 2013-2014).

SB 755 proposes to eliminate the reduced-price school meal category — a common sense solution to address and reduce childhood hunger for thousands of Maryland families. Statewide, Anne Arundel, Baltimore City, Montgomery and Washington County Public Schools have already eliminated the reduced-price category for school breakfast. In these counties, schools have seen increased breakfast participation and simplified administration of school meal

¹ Source: Maryland State Department of Education 2015-2016 school enrollment data available at <http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/msde/programs/schoolnutrition/docs/Free+and+Reduced-Price+Meal+Data.html>

operations. SB 755 will build on the success of these county-level improvements by eliminating the cost of both breakfast and lunch for students who qualify for reduced-price meals.

SB 755 will eliminate a critical barrier — the cost of the meal itself. This bill will remove the cost burden faced by thousands of families statewide, ensuring more students start and end their school day ready to learn. Additionally, SB 755 will reduce the debts incurred by low-income families whose children cannot afford the cost of breakfast and lunch — streamlining cafeteria operations and removing school staff from assuming the role of debt collectors when family budgets simply cannot stretch to meet the cost.

SB 755 offers the State a clear path forward to continuing our progress in reducing childhood hunger and alleviating the burdens of poverty. We believe that SB 755 will have a measurable impact on the health and economic wellbeing of low and middle-income families in every district across our state and we urge a favorable report on SB 755.