

Extending Access to the Community Eligibility Provision Would Feed Students at 227 Schools

Given before the House Ways and Means Committee

Position Statement in Support of House Bill 287

House Bill 287 extends the increased access to healthy school meals in certain communities, improved learning and reduced food insecurity that Maryland has benefitted from since the passage of the Hunger-Free Schools Act of 2015. School districts can implement community eligibility without fear of losing state education funding, and the program is of no cost to Maryland. For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports HB 287.

We know that hungry kids do not make the best students. When a child is hungry, they have trouble with memory and maintaining attention, they have lower test scores and higher rates of absenteeism.^[1] These students are not prepared to learn and their long-term success is diminished. Community eligibility can easily solve these problems by ensuring every child at a certain school or school district can access free school meals. In schools where this provision is implemented, administrators report success after success. States like Illinois, Kentucky, and Virginia have all touted the benefits they've witnessed in their students – benefits we are just starting to see here in Maryland.

There are now 227 hunger-free schools in Maryland that benefit from community eligibility. This also helps schools and school districts streamline their operations and reduce paperwork. When more children eat, the per-meal cost decreases. Less paperwork frees up resources to invest in improving meal quality and increases staff time available for other educational priorities. School districts across the country have implemented community eligibility without losing federal funding or operating in a deficit

Many families in Maryland are still having a difficult time making ends meet. The community eligibility provision frees up families' budgets by using federal dollars to pay for their children's breakfast and lunch. Families can use that money for food at home, housing, or emergency expenses. A family's budget could see significant savings over the course of a school year if they are in a hunger-free school. The community eligibility provision supports both children and their families.

Maryland is a great place for business and our highly educated and skilled workforce plays a major role in attracting new corporations to the state. When we do not invest in our children's health and educational attainment, we work against our interests in the long run. We cannot hope to continue as a leader in the nation's education system and workforce when we choose to leave kids hungry, unable to concentrate and learn. At no cost to the state, community eligibility would continue to make the necessary investments so our workforce remains among the best in the country, inspiring new business to settle here and continued investment from established corporations.

Children cannot learn when they are hungry and Maryland has the chance to provide all children with the necessary nutrition to learn and achieve academic success. The Hunger-Free Schools Act of 2017 costs the state and schools nothing but the return is great. We have the chance to help our state succeed in the long run by giving our future workforce the tools to succeed. Choose to support the families and their children. Choose to support Maryland's future economy.

For these reasons, the Maryland Center on Economic Policy respectfully requests that the Ways and Means Committee give a favorable report to House Bill 287.

[1] Center for Disease Control, "Health and Academic Achievement", 2014, http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/health-academic-achievement.pdf

[2] Maryland State Department of Education, Community Eligibility Study, 2014, as quoted by Robin Ziegler, Program Manager, School and Community Nutrition Programs