

Free School Lunches for all Low-Income Students Help Families Make Ends Meet

Given before the House Ways and Means Committee

Position Statement in Support of House Bill 288

For many Maryland children whose families are struggling to make ends meet, the free and reduced-price meal program at school is the only way they are able to eat breakfast and lunch. By expanding the free lunch program to also cover students who are now only eligible for reduced-price lunch, the state can ensure more children are able to eat healthy meals without putting additional strain on their parents' budgets. For this reason, The Maryland Center on Economic Policy supports House Bill 288.

In Maryland, the household income for a family of four must be less than \$31,590 for the children to be eligible for free school lunch. If that family's income is between \$31,591 and \$44,955, the children are only eligible to receive reduced-price meals.ⁱ Although they are marginally better off, these families are still struggling to afford the basics, given the high cost of living in much of Maryland. Paying for school lunches still can be a challenge for these families.

The cost for a family with two children who participate in the reduced-price meal program is over \$275 a year – more than many low-income families can afford. This means these students are 26 percent more likely to go without school meals, compared to students that qualify for free meals.ⁱⁱ These students may go hungry when there is not enough food at home to bring a packed lunch. Expanding the free lunch program will give more than 45,000 additional students access to free school lunches.

This approach has been successful in other states. In Vermont, all students who were previously only eligible for the reduced-price meals now receive free breakfast and free lunch. Prior to the change, many Vermont students still came to school hungry and empty-handed, according to Hunger Free Vermont.ⁱⁱⁱ Since the free meal program was expanded, breakfast participation has nearly tripled, which means more kids are going through their days with full stomachs and are more ready to focus and learn.

In Maryland, schools are required to serve any child who stands in line for school lunch. So numerous students that are eligible for but cannot afford reduced-price meals run up cafeteria debts, some of which are never paid back. This debt is typically shouldered by the community.

However, if the free lunch program is expanded, students would receive the nutrition they need and families and the community would no longer be burdened with debt from unpaid meals.

Children with full stomachs are more prepared to focus and learn during school. Research has demonstrated that children who are hungry in school are more likely to have behavior problems and poor academic performance. By ensuring that more children get enough to eat each day, Maryland is investing in their long-term success, as well as the state's future prosperity. Those children are more likely to stay in school and be well prepared to continue to higher education or enter the workforce. A well-educated workforce is an important component to maintaining a strong Maryland 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 288.

ⁱ "Federal Poverty Level (FPL)." *HealthCare.gov*. US Department of Health and Human Services

ⁱⁱ "Free and Reduced-Price Meal Data." *Free and Reduced-Price Meal Data*. Maryland State Department of Education

ⁱⁱⁱ Parisi, Marissa. "Hunger Free Vermont: For Students Who Qualify for Reduced-Price Meals, Back-to-School Means Free Lunch This Year." *For Students Who Qualify for Reduced-Price Meals, Back-to-School Means Free Lunch This Year*. Hunger Free Vermont, 6 Aug. 2013.