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May 20, 2021

The Honorable Jason Lewis, Senate Chair  
The Honorable Alice Peisch, House Chair  
Joint Committee on Education  
State House, Boston MA 02133

**RE: An Act to Promote Student Nutrition, Senate 298/House 715**

Dear Chair Lewis and Chair Peisch:

The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts (FBWM) urges the Joint Committee on Education to favorably consider Senate 298/House 715, which would address school policies which seek to shame children because their parents owe school meal debt.

Since 1982, The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts has been feeding our neighbors in need and leading the community to end hunger. We distribute food to our member agencies in Berkshire, Franklin, Hampden and Hampshire counties. These independent pantries, meal sites and shelters are on the front lines of emergency food assistance in our region, playing a crucial role helping individuals, families, seniors and children. The FBWM is also a SNAP outreach partner. We directly assist low-income individuals and families who wish to apply for federal SNAP benefits, and we support initiatives that expand access to free and reduced-price meals in elementary and secondary schools, including legislation to provide students with breakfast after the bell.

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is one of the most important federal programs for combatting child hunger and improving school attendance and outcomes for elementary and secondary school students. Children who do not qualify for a free or reduced-price meal through NSLP, either because their families have incomes above 185% of the Federal Poverty Line or their parents have not applied for the program, must pay for a meal at either a reduced price or the full price. There is ample data that shows that children who do not get enough nutrition do not perform well academically, which then affects their retention, graduation and college admission rates.

Through our work with local food pantry partners and our SNAP outreach, we are deeply aware of the struggles that low-income western Massachusetts families face, especially with seasonal employment as the



farming and tourism industries close down in winter months. We know that families can be employed one month and lose their job the next month because of a breakdown of transportation, an illness in the family, separation or incarceration of a parent. The Covid-19 pandemic has greatly exacerbated these inequities.

Pre-COVID, school meal debt was a significant challenge for most school districts struggling to ensure students are fed and ready to learn while ensuring the costs of food and labor are covered. Currently school districts operating in person are able to offer 100% free meals due to federal USDA waivers. Once these federal options end, school districts may revert back to a range of policies to limit school meal debt including implementing:

- “No charge” policies where students without pre-paid or cash in hand get NO meal.
- “Account caps” where the cafeteria serves students an “alternate meal” – usually a cold cheese sandwich. In some districts, staff report they must toss a hot meal already served to a student.
- Barring students with meal debt from all extra-curricular school activities, denial of grades or graduation activities, and/or referrals to DCF for unpaid meals.

Families in crisis are not always aware they can apply for free or reduced-price meal status at any time of year. Some school districts may not promote the NSLP free/reduced-price application if a family has run out of funds on their “school bucks” accounts or has meal debt. And while this NSLP information is often posted on the school district website, the lack of broadband in western Massachusetts makes it impossible for many low-income families to get this information.

Further, many of the families served by the FBWM are not always aware that receiving SNAP benefits means their children are automatically eligible for free meal status. Our SNAP outreach team works hard to enroll families in SNAP, in part because the SNAP benefit triggers these additional free school meals.

Many families who are on the edge financially rely on school meals as a major source of nutrition for their children. In our work with school districts implementing Breakfast After the Bell we heard repeatedly from teachers and administrators that students came to school ravenously hungry on Mondays and after school vacations because of the lack of food at home.

As has been widely reported, too many Massachusetts schools have policies requiring children with debt or lacking funds to be denied food, especially at the high school level. Some districts have policies that require cafeteria staff to swap out the hot meal for a cold sandwich if a child has reached an “account cap.” And some districts also bar students as well as their siblings from participating in extracurricular activities, receiving grades, or getting a cap and gown if there is any meal debt. In contrast, some school districts, including the Amherst/Pelham School District, have adopted very positive policies on school meal charges that ensure all children are fed and ready to learn and that meal debt matters are worked



out between adults--parents/legal guardians and the school district.

We urge the Joint Committee on Education to favorably report out S.298 and H.715, legislation which will help reduce meal debt, maximize federal reimbursements and ensure that children are not punished or embarrassed while schools and parents work to resolve meal charges.

Sincerely,

Christina Maxwell  
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The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts

Laura Sylvester  
Public Policy Manager  
The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts