



May 25, 2021

Chair Jason Lewis, Senate Committee on Education
Chair Alice Hanlon Peisch, House Committee on Education
Massachusetts State House
24 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02133

RE: Support for S.298/H.715 - An Act to Promote Student Nutrition

Dear Chair Lewis, Chair Peisch, and Honorable Members of the Joint Committee on Education,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this critically important piece of legislation. As one of the leading organizations behind the Rise and Shine Massachusetts coalition that was instrumental in passing Breakfast After the Bell legislation last session, The Greater Boston Food Bank (GBFB) supports any legislation that will create more equitable access to school meals across the Commonwealth and alleviate food insecurity among our students. **As such, we strongly support S.298 and H.715, because no child in Massachusetts should go to school feeling hungry or stigmatized for their financial situation.**

GBFB is the largest hunger-relief organization in New England and among the largest food banks in the country. In response to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, GBFB has distributed the equivalent of nearly 110 million meals through its network of nearly 600 dedicated food distribution partners and programs in the 190 cities and towns across Eastern Massachusetts.

According to Feeding America, children have a higher risk of food insecurity than the general population in Massachusetts. Across the Commonwealth, 1 in 9 children go to bed hungry on any given night. Food insecurity in Massachusetts is projected to remain 20 percent above pre-COVID-19 levels throughout 2021 – but this rate jumps to 30 percent for children. Through our 8 school-based pantry programs that serve 2,000 families per month, we have seen firsthand the impact that food insecurity has on children and their families.

According to Mass Law Reform Institute's study, *Denying Food and Shaming Children: Unpaid School Meal Policies in Massachusetts*, local school districts had varying policies pre-COVID for how to manage student meal debt. While schools must balance ensuring students are fed and ready to learn with ensuring that the costs of labor and food are covered, we cannot accept policies that deny our children healthy food due to financial circumstances out of their control.

Within 154 Massachusetts school districts, the report identified a range of issues including: (1) "No charge" policies, where students without money to pay for a meal are simply not fed and stay hungry the entire day; (2) Policies setting "account caps," during which cafeteria workers are directed to throw

70 South Bay Avenue • Boston, MA 02118 • Tel: 617.427.5200 • Fax: 617.427.0146 • GBFB.org



away the hot meal and instead serve the child a cold sandwich; (3) Policies authorizing staff to speak directly to the child about their meal debt; and (4) Aggressive tactics to collect unpaid meal debt like barring students and siblings from extracurricular activities, denying report cards, and withholding graduation caps and gowns.

Currently, school districts operating in person are able to offer 100% free meals due to federal USDA waivers. However, once these federal options end, school districts may revert back to the range of policies mentioned above to limit school meal debt. While many schools may not adhere to these policies in practice, we must ensure that our written policies reflect and uphold our values as a Commonwealth. No student should go hungry and feel ashamed if their family cannot afford a meal in our schools. A standard Massachusetts policy across our school system would provide consistency and fairness for each student, which is what S.298 and H.715 would do.

This legislation would require schools and school districts with a high number of low-income “directly certified” students to implement the universal free school meal options through the federal Community Eligibility Program (CEP), qualifying more students for free and reduced-price meals. It would also allow school districts to offer families with income under 185% Federal Poverty Level free meals and seek state reimbursement for the reduced-price lunch co-pay so that families no longer have to pay it. Research shows that eliminating co-pays boosts overall meal participation and reduces meal debt.

This bill also requires school districts to reduce meal debt by robustly checking databases for free meal eligibility, promoting SNAP benefits that trigger automatic free meal status for a family, and directly communicating with adults about meal debt while limiting the steps a district can take against students with debt, which would all lead to increased meal participation and reduced stigma. Finally, this bill would allow districts to seek state reimbursement to provide free meals to kinship families, including grandchildren living with grandparents. Current USDA guidance leaves out certain kinship children, so this bill would address that gap and allow for more equitable access to school meals.

Access to nutritious school meals is key to addressing the health of our children. This legislation offers the opportunity to invest in our students, their nutrition, and their future. Expanding access to school meals and reducing burden and stigma for children in need is a worthwhile initiative. **GBFB enthusiastically lends our support to S.298 and H.715 and respectfully requests that you vote these bills favorably out of committee without delay.**

Sincerely,

Catherine Lynn

Catherine Lynn
Sr. Director, Communications and Public Affairs
The Greater Boston Food Bank

70 South Bay Avenue • Boston, MA 02118 • Tel: 617.427.5200 • Fax: 617.427.0146 • GBFB.org

