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

RE: Testimony in Support of An Act to Promote School
Nutrition (Senate 298/House 715)

Dear Chairs Senator Lewis and Representative Peisch and
Honorable Committee Members:

Jewish Family & Children's Service (JF&CS) is writing to express our support for the Senate 298/House 715, legislation which would increase access to free school meals for eligible children and would address the problem of school policies which seek to shame children or treat them differently because their families owe school meal debt.

For more than 150 years, JF&CS has been helping individuals and families build a strong foundation for well-being across the lifespan. Through an integrated portfolio of more than 40 programs reaching communities throughout Eastern and Central Massachusetts, JF&CS focuses on meeting the needs of new parents and their children, older adults and family caregivers, children and adults with disabilities, and people experiencing poverty, hunger, or domestic abuse.

Jewish text and tradition compel us to honor the dignity of every person, especially those who are struggling. *Leviticus* commands us to leave the corners of our fields and the gleanings of our harvest and vineyards for the poor and the stranger. This commandment is a clear expression of our collective responsibility for each other. As an organization guided by Jewish values, we believe that no one should go hungry, regardless of their circumstance.

JF&CS pays particular attention to SNAP because it plays a critical role in addressing hunger and food insecurity in our community. SNAP is the first line of defense against hunger for low-income residents. Our staff help eligible individuals and families access and maintain SNAP benefits. We also operate the largest kosher food pantry in New England, providing healthy food on a monthly and emergency basis to people in need. We are members of local anti-

hunger coalitions and we sit on the Advisory Board for the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, the state agency which administers SNAP in Massachusetts. Preventing food insecurity is central to our mission.

JF&CS supports An Act to Promote School Nutrition because this bill endeavors to ensure that children living in poverty receive free meals. Although children whose families receive SNAP are immediately eligible for free meals, many of these children fall through the cracks when their schools fail to check databases for eligible families and their families do not know how to apply for free meals. This problem does not exist in schools in high poverty areas which implement the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Every child at a school which participates in the CEP receives free meals without the need to file an application. Unfortunately, not all eligible schools choose to participate in the CEP. For example, in Waltham where the JF&CS office sits, the entire district is eligible to participate in CEP, but several schools have chosen not to; only three out of ten Waltham schools participate in CEP.¹ The Act to Promote School Nutrition, with limited exception, makes participation in the CEP mandatory for eligible schools.

The bill would also ensure free meals for children being raised by grandparents or other relative caregivers who are currently excluded from free school meal status. This is a group of low-income and special needs children that includes severely disabled children whose Medicaid is automatic with their SSI, children placed by DCF with caregivers who qualify for state or federal Guardianship Assistance, and special needs children also placed by DCF and whose adoptive parents receive Title IV-E Adoption Assistance benefits. This bill would allow this group of vulnerable children to be eligible for free meals.

Eligible families who are unable to access free school meals often end up incurring meal debt. The Massachusetts Law Reform Institute recently published a report, *Denying Food and Shaming Children: Unpaid School Meal Policies in Massachusetts*, which shows that many children are being denied food and are being publicly shamed for the school meal debt owed by their parent or guardian. Shaming practices include a taking a warm meal away from a child who has already been served and replacing the meal with a cold cheese sandwich and publicly identifying students in the lunchroom by stamping their hands to indicate that their families owe meal debt. Senate 298/House 715 would prevent children from being purposefully shamed for the debt of their parents or denied food as a form of punishment.

JF&CS strongly supports Senate 298/House 715 because, if passed, it would decrease levels of food insecurity in the Commonwealth and would eliminate school shaming practices. It would do this by:

- Establishing that no school official may delay or deny food to a child or sibling as a form of punishment due solely to unpaid meal debt

¹ <http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=25529>

- Prohibiting school districts from establishing policies that shame a child or treat a child differently when their family has accrued unpaid school meal debt
- Requiring school districts to take steps to maximize federal NSLP reimbursements and to pursue the Community Eligibility (universal free meals to all) provision if the district is otherwise eligible to do so, and to eliminate the Reduced Price category
- Requiring school districts to limit conversations and communications about debt to adults: parents /legal guardians and school districts.
- Authorizing school districts to provide free school meals to eligible children living with grandparents or other relative caregivers

JF&CS respectfully requests favorable consideration of this legislation by the Joint Committee on Education.

Sincerely,

Gail Schulman

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