



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: Testimony in Support of S.298/H.715, An Act to Promote Student Nutrition

Dear Chairman Lewis, Chairwoman Peisch, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of S.298 /H.715, *An Act to Promote Student Nutrition* and for the committee's past support of child nutrition programs, including passage of An Act Regarding Breakfast After the Bell last session.

COVID-19 EXACERBATING AN ALREADY UNACCEPTABLE PROBLEM: CHILDHOOD FOOD INSECURITY

Prior to March 2020, we knew that a hungry child cannot learn, much less thrive. Unfortunately, COVID-19 put the problem of food insecurity into starker relief and highlighted the critical role of school nutrition programs in addressing childhood hunger. During the pandemic, 1 in 5 households with children in Massachusetts experienced food insecurity. Fortunately, Congress and the United States Department of Agriculture moved swiftly to allow and support schools and community organizations to provide school meals for free to any children or teen. In the summer of 2020, as an example, among households in Massachusetts with children who received free food, 59% reported that they received free food from a school meal site.

As our communities and schools begin to resemble their pre-pandemic identities, there are many areas where "normal" is simply not good enough. Before the pandemic, 1 in 10 children faced food insecurity in Massachusetts. As we return to "normal," schools will continue to play a critical role in so many aspects of our children's lives. For many, that will include two or more meals each school day. Up to half of many low-income children's daily calories can come from school meals.ⁱ We know that when children have access to proper nutrition, they are better able to learn and live healthier lives. Undernourished students have poorer cognitive performance, particularly when they miss breakfast.ⁱⁱ Beyond academic success, children who experience hunger are more likely to have behavioral and attention problems as compared to other students.ⁱⁱⁱ The Legislature can help these children get the food they need by improving access to school meals. Passing An Act to Promote Student Nutrition is an important next step in doing so.

PROMOTING STUDENT NUTRITION BEFORE AND AFTER COVID-19

Project Bread has more than twenty years of experience working to boost participation, quality, and health of school meals as a strategy to end childhood hunger. In partnership with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), through the Child Nutrition Outreach Program (CNOP), we provide technical assistance to schools throughout the state to increase participation in both school breakfast and summer meals. We are grateful for the Legislature's support of this important program. In addition, we support schools with implementation of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows eligible schools to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without collecting





household applications. Finally, our work in the schools is enhanced by our outreach efforts to increase enrollment in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), participation in which automatically qualifies a student for free school meal and contributes to the district's eligibility and financial benefits of CEP.

Project Bread believes that, ultimately, a universal school meals program for all Massachusetts schools is the best way to both increase school meal participation and eradicate school meal debt. In the meantime, we will continue to advocate and provide support to schools to adopt school meals for all at the local level. We know, however, that school-by-school, district-by-district outreach can only reach so many students. **It is in support of this work to increase access to healthy school meals for all Massachusetts children that we ask for the committee's positive action on S.298/H.715, *An Act to Promote Student Nutrition*.**

THE LEGISLATURE'S LEADERSHIP IS NEEDED TO INCREASE ACCESS AND DECREASE DEBT

Because Project Bread works closely with school nutrition directors and business managers, we understand the challenge of balancing finances with feeding children. An Act to Promote Student Nutrition moves us in the right direction, addressing both sides of this challenge by ensuring more children are fed while also increasing the federal reimbursements food service departments rely on. This legislation would:

- *Eliminate the reduced-price fee for school meals.* Currently, students living in households between 130 to 185 percent of the federal poverty level are eligible for many basic needs programs, but are still required to pay \$0.40 for school lunch and \$0.30 for school breakfast. Project Bread has estimated that eliminating the reduced-price fee and serving free meals to those students would cost \$1.6 million under the current bill language but bring in additional \$1.85 million in federal reimbursements, with up to 3,000 more students participating in school meals daily. This represents up to \$126 per student per year for these lower income families.
- *Require that schools communicate directly with adults* rather than students to address school meal debt and limit the steps a district might take against students who have debt;
- *Ensure all students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals receive them* by requiring diligence on the part of schools in checking databases for free meal eligibility and promoting SNAP.
- *Promote adoption of universal free meals* by requiring schools and school districts with high numbers of low-income students to consider participation in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Under the current bill language, we estimated this would increase participation to up to 1,100 more students eating school meals daily.

While Project Bread supports this legislation as written and we thank the committee for previously voting these bills favorably, we strongly encourage one revision. The bill currently requires steps to be taken to adopt universal school meals in schools with an identified student percentage of fifty percent or greater and in districts with an identified student percentage of sixty percent or greater. Using 2020 data, this requirement only applies to 34 schools not currently participating in CEP. **We recommend the bill be amended to include all schools and districts eligible to participate in CEP at the federal minimum (currently forty percent).** This could be done by striking subsection (d) and replacing it with:





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School districts and individual schools with a minimum identified percentage set by the department shall be required to elect and implement the federal Community Eligibility Provision or Provision 2 to provide universal free school breakfast and lunch to all students. This provision may be waived if the district is able to justify to the department that implementation shall incur financial hardships to the district or unless the district school board votes before June 1 of the first year of eligibility to not participate in one of the federal options, or the department determines that the school district and/or individual schools no longer have the requisite qualifying percentage. A school nutrition director or designee shall be required to attend at least one training by the department to learn about community eligibility provision available to said district before the vote taken by the school committee.

The minimum identified student percentage set by the department shall be no higher than the rate defined in 7 C.F.R. 245.9(f)(3)(i).

This amendment would nearly double the bill's estimated impact on participation to nearly 8,000 students daily. This change would also decrease the cost of eliminating the reduced-price category to \$1.3 million and increase total federal reimbursements by up to \$6 million. By comparison, the current language would increase reimbursements by up to a smaller \$3.2 million. This amendment preserves the ability for districts and schools to opt out of the requirement in cases of financial hardship or local opposition.

THE TIME IS NOW

While there has always been an urgency to addressing childhood food insecurity, passage of An Act to Promote Student Nutrition is both especially critical and beneficial ahead of the September 30th deadline to elect CEP starting with the 2021-2022 school year.

First, the identified student percentage defines both eligibility for CEP and the reimbursement rate for schools adopting CEP based on a multiplier. For example, a school at 40% ISP is reimbursed for 64% of its meals at the federal free rate, and 36% of meals at the paid rate. A school at 60% ISP would be reimbursed for 96% of its meals at the federal free rate and only 4% at the paid rate. Many schools and districts have made CEP work at lower ISPs, but it is true that as ISPs increase, reimbursements increase, making the switch to CEP a more financially advantageous proposition.

The pandemic has caused the SNAP caseload to increase significantly in nearly every community in the Commonwealth, with an overall increase of roughly 25% between February 2020 and April 2021. SNAP is designed to expand for crises, such as the pandemic, and contract during times of economic growth. **In short, schools and districts that adopt CEP ahead of the coming school year can lock in a higher ISP for the next four years.** Once CEP has been adopted, schools and districts can recertify in order to receive a higher reimbursement rate, but will not be penalized for an improving local economy for those four years.

In addition, households with students attending a CEP school may be eligible for additional benefits, particularly during this period of recovery. Pandemic EBT (P-EBT), a program created to provide benefits to families to purchase food for students in remote or hybrid learning situations, was distributed to students eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Since every student at a CEP school receives meals without charge, every student at CEP schools received P-EBT benefits. If there are further extensions to the program, greater CEP adoption would increase the households receiving P-EBT benefits. Aside from





the primary goal of addressing food insecurity, greater participation in P-EBT also helps boost the Massachusetts economy by increasing the food purchasing power of families.

We are proud of the work we have done with our partners to increase the availability of and participation in school meals for children around the state, ultimately decreasing school meal debt and food insecurity among students. This legislation will multiply those results by reaching more students in more communities. **We urge you to report An Act to Promote Student Nutrition out of the committee favorably so we can ensure more students have the nutrition necessary to succeed. We also urge you to do so quickly and call upon your colleagues to pass S.298/H.715 to enact it into law as soon as possible, so that districts can lock in higher reimbursements.**

Project Bread is grateful to the committee and the entire legislature for your strong partnership in our work solve hunger in Massachusetts.

Sincerely,

Erin McAleer
President & CEO, Project Bread

ⁱ Cullen, K.W., Chen, T. (2017) The contribution of the USDA school breakfast and lunch program meals to student daily dietary intake, 5, 82-85.

ⁱⁱ Taras, H. (2005) Nutrition and Student Performance at School. Journal of School Health, 75(6), 199-213.

ⁱⁱⁱ Murphy, J. M., Wehler, C. A., Pagano, M. E., Little, M., Kleinman, R. F., & Jellinek, M. S. (1998). Relationship Between Hunger and Psychosocial Functioning in Low-Income American Children. Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 37, 163-170.

