



*The Commonwealth of Massachusetts*

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
ANDY X. VARGAS

May 20, 2021

Senator Jason M. Lewis, Senate Chair  
Joint Committee on Education  
Massachusetts State House, Room 511-B  
Boston, MA 02133

Representative Alice Hanlon Peisch, House Chair  
Joint Committee on Education  
Massachusetts State House, Room 473G  
Boston, MA 02133

Chair Lewis, Chair Peisch, and honorable members of the Committee:

I write the following testimony in support of **House Bill 715 and Senate Bill 298** both titled, *An Act to Promote School Nutrition*.

We know that when kids are hungry at school, they cannot learn. Hungry kids have difficulty concentrating, have lower academic achievement, suffer cognitive development impairments, and exhibit more behavioral problems than their food secure peers. Food insecurity among kids in Massachusetts isn't a new pandemic induced phenomenon – food insecurity among Children in Massachusetts prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic was already too high at 1 in 10. Still, more than a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity has spread and is on the rise. According to a survey conducted by the Greater Boston Food Bank, food insecurity rates were highest among adults with children: 42 % of households with children are now experiencing hunger.

These bills presents us with a unique opportunity to get Massachusetts back on the road to recovery by taking four key steps to feed more students for free, boost federal revenue to school districts, reduce unpaid meal debt, and assist families with the digital divide and expensive monthly internet payments. The four steps are as follows:

1. **Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)** – This provision of the bill requires school districts with a high number of low-income students to implement the universal free school meal option which provides all students in a school or district with free breakfast and lunch, regardless of their economic status. Schools that can justify that doing so would create a financial burden will be exempted from this provision. Adopting this language before the end of the pandemic give us an opportunity to maximize the full benefits of the CEP:
  - a. **We can feed more students through CEP than ever before.** The rise in food insecurity has caused SNAP participation rates to skyrocket in the state by over

25% since March 2020. CEP eligibility is based on participation in programs such as SNAP, so an increase in participation means more schools and districts can utilize CEP to serve universal free school meals for all the children in those schools and districts.

- b. **Reimbursement rates for CEP are high.** The total reimbursement that a school receives for serving a meal through CEP depends on how large the percentage of “identified students” are in a school or district. For example, Haverhill (55% ISP) gets reimbursed less per meal served than Lawrence (75% ISP). The current atypically high identified student percentages means that school districts will pull in more federal revenue per meal than ever before.
  - c. **School Districts can lock in these historically high numbers for the next four years.** This is an opportunity for schools and districts to feed all students and receive higher rates of reimbursement than they are likely going to qualify for again once the pandemic is over. Furthermore, the total percentage of economically disadvantaged students in our schools is also higher because these students are less likely to have been pulled from enrollment for homeschooling or private schools. Therefore, the enrollment numbers currently provide an opportune time to capitalize on this federal program.
  - d. **Adopting this policy will allow Massachusetts to target the digital divide without spending state or local funds.** All students in CEP districts will qualify for federal Emergency Broadband Benefits – granting families \$50/month towards broadband internet service and a \$100 discount to purchase a computer or tablet.<sup>1</sup>
  - e. **Food insecurity is a racial justice issue.** People of color are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity. In October, 1 in 6 white households with children versus 1 in 3 Black households and 1 in 4 Latino/a households were food insecure.<sup>2</sup> Undocumented students are also set to benefit from being fed from this program, as the need for administrative documentation from schools is eliminated.
2. **Reduced-price Lunch Elimination** – The bill also eliminates reduced-price co-pays for students that attend schools that do not offer a universal free school meal option. Families with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty line are eligible to receive reduced-price school meals. However, these families are still struggling financially, and many cannot afford to pay for school meals. By charging low-income families a 30-cent co-pay for school breakfast and 40-cent copay for school lunch, we create a barrier to participating in school meals. The reality is that even a modest co-pay charge is a burden for low-income families.

Eliminating the reduced-price copayment for breakfast and lunch would remove this financial barrier, increase participation among these children, and help low-income

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fcc.gov/broadbandbenefit>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.projectbread.org/hunger-by-the-numbers>

families stretch limited budgets. The following eight states and the District of Columbia already provide state funding to eliminate the reduced-price copayment for breakfast or lunch or both, resulting in increased access and participation among reduced-price eligible children:

<u>Breakfast and Lunch</u>	<u>Breakfast Only</u>
- Colorado	- Maine
- District of Columbia	- North Carolina
- Minnesota	- North Dakota
- Oregon	
- Vermont	
- Washington <sup>3</sup>	

- 3. School Meal Debt Shaming** – School meal debt remains a challenge for most school districts as they struggle to ensure students are fed and ready to learn while ensuring the costs of food and labor are covered. According to the School Nutrition Association, 76 percent of school districts reported having outstanding debt. Still, school district policies on dealing with children that can't pay for lunch vary greatly on the local level. Analysis shows that policies in Massachusetts stand anywhere from barring children from extra-curricular school activities to letting students end up hungry the whole day.<sup>4</sup> Under this language Massachusetts will join a growing list of states, including California, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Washington, and West Virginia that have instituted statewide protections for students who have accrued unpaid school meal debt. Schools would still be able to institute their own policies for collecting unpaid meal debt, however they will not be able to embarrass, stigmatize or punish students with unpaid school meal debt.
- 4. Maximize federal Reimbursement** – Under this language, school districts are also required to reduce meal debt by more robustly checking databases for free meal eligibility and promoting the SNAP (food stamps) benefits that trigger automatic free meal status for a family.

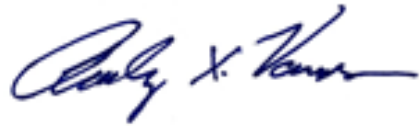
At the onset of the pandemic, Massachusetts experienced the largest relative increase of food-insecure individuals in the nation, and the highest increase of food-insecure children at 102%, according to analysis by Feeding America. Now, we have the tools before us to rise from the pandemic with a plan to provide thousands of children free breakfast and lunch every day for the next four years, while pulling in millions of dollars in federal revenue. Thank you for your time, attention, and careful consideration. These bills were reported favorably by Joint Committee on Education last legislative session, and I hope the Committee will vote to advance these bills again.

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<sup>3</sup> Washington eliminates the reduced-price copayment for school lunch in K-3 public schools.

<sup>4</sup> Report Viewer | Mass Law Reform Institute. (2019). Retrieved 1 September 2019, from <https://www.mlri.org/report-viewer/?report=Denying%20Food%20and%20Shaming%20Children:%20Unpaid%20School%20Meal%20Policies%20in%20Massachusetts~579>

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Andy X. Vargas". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Andy" being the most prominent part.

Andy X. Vargas  
State Representative  
3<sup>rd</sup> Essex District