



*Creating a hunger-free community*

Thursday, May 20, 2021

The Honorable Jason Lewis, Senate Chair  
The Honorable Alice Peisch, House Chair  
Joint Committee on Education

RE: An Act to Promote Student Nutrition, S.298 / H.715

Dear Chairs Lewis and Peisch:

On behalf of Worcester County Food Bank (WCFB), we appreciate the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of S.298 / H.715, An Act to Promote School Nutrition sponsored by Senator Cynthia Creem and Representatives Andy Vargas and Sean Garballey, which will move us closer to alleviating the burden of hunger for our Commonwealth's children, while balancing school nutrition program budgets.

This legislation would:

- Promote adoption of universal free meals by requiring schools and school districts with high numbers of low-income students to participate in Community Eligibility Provision (CEP);
- Ensure all students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals receive them, by requiring diligence on the part of school in checking databases for free meal eligibility and promoting SNAP; and
- 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.

Meal debt, indeed, most debts, is often an early sign of financial distress and not willful intent by a well-off parent to "game the system." Often parents are not aware that they can apply for free meal status any time of the year, such as when income changes, a parent leaves the home or becomes ill. On the flip side, many school districts do not routinely check available state databases to see if a child in debt may be receiving SNAP (food stamps) or Medicaid, both of which are benefits that trigger free meal status and federal reimbursement to a school.

No child should be punished for meal debt, humiliated in front of their peers, or used as a pawn to get parents to pay up. Meal payments and debt are adult matters. Removing the ability of a school district to establish policies that shame a child or to treat a child differently, including serving a different meal, when their family has accrued unpaid school meal debt.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated a food insecurity problem that already affected far too many of our neighbors – yours and mine – living next door, around the corner and across town.

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In the first 12 months of the pandemic (March 2020 – February 2021), WCFB and its network of 115 Partner Agencies (primarily food pantries and community meal programs) distributed enough food for approximately 123,000 meals every week: a 12% increase compared to the previous 12 months. Together, we helped 426,500 people (duplicated number), 1/3 of whom are children: a 17% increase.

However, donated food alone cannot solve the problem of food insecurity. We need sustainable and systemic solutions like CEP.

The pandemic also highlighted income inequality in our Commonwealth, in our country and the importance of ensuring children have access to food and are not punished or embarrassed by school meal debt when schools return to “normal.”

The evidence is overwhelming. Food insecurity impairs learning and causes decreased productivity in school age children. National research confirms that efforts to boost school meal participation mean less hunger, better test scores, and improved student health.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this bill. If you have any questions or would like more information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jean G. McMurray". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Jean G. McMurray  
Chief Executive Director