



June 12, 2023

Massachusetts State Legislature
State House
Boston, MA 02122

To:

The Honorable Karen Spilka
The Honorable Michael Rodrigues
The Honorable Cindy Friedman
The Honorable Pat O'Connor

The Honorable Ron Mariano
The Honorable Aaron Michlewitz
The Honorable Ann-Margaret Ferrante
The Honorable Todd Smola

CC:

Members of the Massachusetts Legislature

RE: Secure Permanent School Meals for All in the Fiscal Year 2024 State Budget

Dear President, Speaker Mariano and Conference Committee Members:

As superintendents across the Commonwealth, we urge you to support passage of legislation to make School Meals for All permanent as part of the FY24 budget. Last year, the Legislature made the wise investment to extend school meals through the current school year in the FY2023 budget. Because of this extension, an additional 80,000 students ate lunch in October 2022 compared to October 2019 in schools not previously serving universal free meals. In other words, by investing, the Legislature has been successful in decreasing food insecurity, improving health, and improving education outcomes. We urge you to keep this program permanent.

In 2019, 24% of food insecure children were ineligible to receive free or reduced-price school meals in our traditional meal system. With the lingering economic impacts over the last few years and increasing food costs, returning to the status quo is not a viable option for these families. Students would face the twin barriers of cost and stigma.

Other states who returned to the traditional meal system have seen skyrocketing school meal debt that puts significant pressure on families and schools. When families are unable to pay, the debt must be covered by the school district. Reducing or eliminating this investment will transfer costs to schools and families already struggling with other demands on our budgets. Providing robust access to nutrition is a fundamental foundation to student success, but our school districts are spread thin. We need the state to keep providing this critical resource so that we can more productively make use of our normal school budget. We view School Meals for All as a needed part of an education, not simply a nice add-on.



If we want our students to succeed they need this most fundamental of school supplies, guaranteed access to food. Participation in school meals has been shown to:

- Improve attendance: A hungry student cannot learn, but one who misses school due to illness or other hardships also cannot fully participate in their education.^{i,ii}
- Improve performance. Many studies have found access to and participation in school meals can improve test scores across all incomes.^{iii,iv,v}
- Improve socio-emotional health and behavior. School meals certainly help students have access to a basic physical need in food, but several studies have also found that school meals have a positive impact on suspension and discipline rates as well as reported reduction in bullying.^{vi}

We ask the Legislature to make School Meals for All permanent to ensure children can make the most of their education and families have the necessary support as they continue to navigate an uncertain time.

Sincerely,

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

ⁱⁱ 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 American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 37, 163-170.

ⁱⁱⁱ Logan, C.W. Community Eligibility Provision Evaluation; United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office: Denver, CO, USA, 2014.

^{iv} Leos-Urbel, J.; Schwartz, A.E.; Weinstein, M.; Corcoran, S. Not just for poor kids: The impact of universal free school breakfast on meal participation and student outcomes. *Econ. Educ. Rev.* 2013, 36, 88-107.

^v Schwartz, A.E.; Rothbart, M.W. Let them eat lunch: The impact of universal free meals on student performance. *J. Policy Anal. Manag.* 2020, 39, 376-410.

^{vi} Gutierrez, E. The Effect of Universal Free Meals on Student Perceptions of School Climate: Evidence from New York City. doi: 10.26300/mc