



Testimony Re: House Bill 6007-Federal AID School Lunch and Breakfast Program

House Finance Committee

April 26, 2023

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice our support for elements of House Bill 6007 and thank Representatives Tanzi for sponsoring and Representatives Cortvriend, Morales, Fogarty, Felix, Spears, Potter, Henries, Kislak, and Giraldo for co-sponsoring. This bill would repeal the current laws on mandatory school lunch and breakfast programs and establish a new standard that would require all public elementary and secondary schools to make reimbursable breakfasts and lunches available to all students under the rules and regulations of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Rhode Island Department of Education by maximizing access to federal funds and requiring all districts to adopt the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

In the fall of 2021, 56,812 of Rhode Island's 138,566 public school students (41%) were eligible to participate in the National School Lunch Program and obtain a free or reduced-price lunch. This program offers nutritious meals, which, together with school breakfasts, make up a large proportion of the daily dietary intake of participating children. During the 2020–2021 school year, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the vast majority of meals (99.4% of breakfasts and 99.8% of lunches in the U.S.) were offered to children at no charge. In Rhode Island, during the 2020- 2021 school year, free breakfasts and lunches were available to all students, regardless of income. However, the expired rules and regulations that require free school meals during the pandemic can leave hundreds of Rhode Island school children without access to healthy school meals.

One way Rhode Island can ensure that more students get free breakfast and lunch at school is by encouraging whole districts and high-need schools within districts to adopt the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). The federal CEP allows schools and districts with 40% or more students identified as low-income (e.g., enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) or at-risk (i.e., homeless or in foster care) to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students and offers higher reimbursements. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports efforts to encourage districts and individual schools to participate in the CEP program for school meals by decreasing financial barriers to participation and creating

new poverty measures for the education funding formula that do not rely on data collected from the school meal program application.

We encourage the state to provide free school meals to all students, regardless of income. We urge the committee to consider amending this bill to remove any provisions of families contributing to paying for school breakfast or lunch, even if optional.

Data on how many children at different income levels took advantage of free meals during the COVID-19 pandemic should provide the information we need to assess the costs of this proposal. We know what the benefits would be. **Undernourished children are more likely to have poorer cognitive functioning when they miss breakfast. They are more likely to have behavior, emotional, and academic problems, more likely to repeat a grade, and more likely to be suspended.** Children experiencing hunger are also more likely to be tardy or absent from school.

I have attached our [Issue Brief, Child Hunger in Rhode Island](#). We hope this information is helpful to the Committee and are happy to offer additional information as needed. Thank you for your efforts to ensure that children get the nutrition they need to do their best in school and for the opportunity to comment.