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Testimony Re: Senate Bill 68 - Healthy School Meals for All
Senate Education Committee
May 10, 2023
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Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I'm here today to voice Rhode Island KIDS COUNT's support for Senate Bill 68. I'd like to thank Chair Cano for sponsoring this bill and Senator Acosta for sponsoring Senate Bill 71, a bill with similar intent. We ask that this bill be titled the Healthy School Meals for All bill and amended to mirror House Bill 5639. **This bill, as amended, would ensure that our schools provide breakfast and lunch to all enrolled attending students every school day at no cost so they can learn and thrive.**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the USDA provided funding for schools to offer meals free of charge to all students. In Rhode Island, schools offered free breakfast and lunch to all students during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, but the federal pandemic waiver ended in June 2022, and this year school meals are once again offered under a tiered system where students receive free, reduced-price, or full-price meals depending on their family's income. Schools are back to collecting school meal applications and incurring and trying to collect school meal debt from families with incomes that may be just over the income cutoff or that simply did not complete the required forms. This system creates stress and work for families and schools.

For this reason, many other states are making Healthy School Meals for All permanent. California, Maine, Minnesota, and New Mexico passed legislation to do this, and in the 2022 election Colorado voters approved a ballot measure to provide free meals for all public-school students. Other states, including Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont, passed one-year extensions, and are providing free school meals to all students this school year and working to make these policies permanent.

Why are so many states considering Healthy School Meals for All legislation – because it simply makes sense for our kids, our schools, and our state.

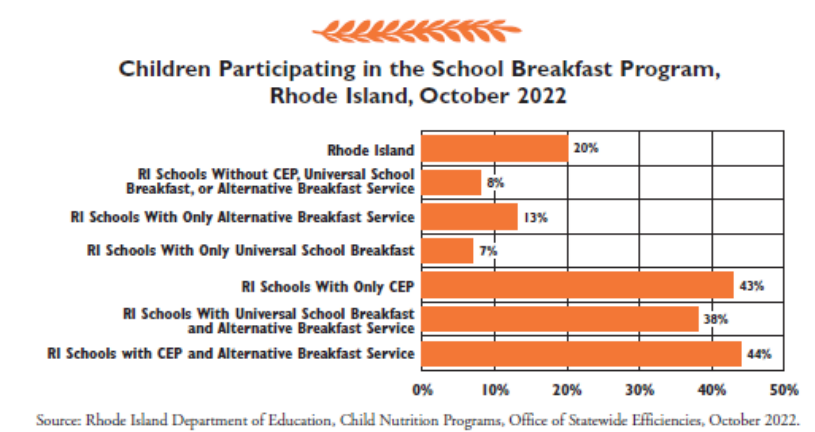
Children cannot learn on an empty stomach. According to the RI Life Index, a survey conducted by Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and Brown University, food insecurity is at an all-time high in Rhode Island with almost one in three (31%) households reporting that they struggle to pay for the food they need and highest among households with children (41%), particularly low-income households with children (65%). Children who are hungry are more

likely to have behavior, emotional, and academic problems and are more likely to be tardy or absent from school, be suspended, and repeat a grade.

Providing school meals to all students will reduce stigma and improve equity. Providing free meals to all students increases school meal participation by removing the stigma often associated with school meals.

Providing school meals for all students would reduce administrative costs. Schools spend a tremendous amount of time and effort collecting and processing school meal applications and collecting unpaid school meal debt. This bill would ease the administrative burden for schools and end the problem of unpaid school meal debt.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT has been encouraging schools to adopt policies and practices that improve school breakfast participation for a long time, including breakfast in the classroom, breakfast after the bell, universal school breakfast, and the Community Eligibility Provision.



House Bill 5639 includes many of our recommendations and other strategies that will ensure that children receive healthy school meals. We recommend that Senate Bill 68 be amended to mirror House Bill 5639 and include provisions:

- Ensuring that school districts seek to achieve the highest level of student participation by offering breakfast in the classroom, breakfast after the bell, or on the go.
- Providing lunch periods of at least 30 minutes
- Requiring that school districts seek to maximize access to federal funds by participating in the Community Eligibility Provision, known as CEP, or other federal options.
- Providing culturally appropriate meals and engaging students and families in menu development

We urge this committee to amend this bill to mirror House Bill 5639 and move to pass it so all children in Rhode Island have access to the nutritious school meals they need to learn and thrive. Healthy School Meals for All is a key ingredient our state needs to improve educational outcomes. RIDE estimates that the fiscal impact of this bill to be \$35 million. We think our children and our schools are worth it. Thank you for investing in the health and well-being of Rhode Island's children and for the opportunity to provide this testimony.