



**RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT**

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## **Testimony Re: House Bill 6150 Regarding School Lunches**

**House Finance Committee**

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**Stephanie Geller, Senior Policy Analyst**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to provide information pertinent to House Bill 6150 which would require that free lunches be provided for all elementary and secondary students attending public schools.

Rhode Island law requires that all public schools make breakfasts and lunches available to all students, including free or reduced-price meals to students who qualify based on their family income (less than 130% of the federal poverty level for free meals and between 130% and 185% for reduced-price meals).

During the 2016-2017 school year, 67,523 of Rhode Island's 142,142 public school students (48%) 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.

Recent articles in the media have highlighted a practice known as "lunch shaming," which draws attention to a child whose family is behind in making lunch payments by giving that child a cheese sandwich or other less desirable lunch in place of the usually offered hot lunch. Several states and Congress are considering legislation to ban the practice of lunch shaming, and this bill is intended to address this issue as well.

### **Community Eligibility Provision**

One way Rhode Island can ensure that more students get access to free or reduced-price meals is by encouraging whole districts and high-need schools within districts to adopt the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows schools with 40% or more students identified as low-income or at-risk (i.e., homeless or in foster care) to provide free breakfasts and lunches to all students and offers higher federal reimbursements.

During the 2016-2017 school year, 19.1% of Rhode Island's eligible schools adopted CEP, the third lowest rate in the nation, with only nine Providence schools and the MET participating. Nationally, 54.7% of eligible schools adopted CEP, and our neighboring states of Massachusetts (60.7%) and Connecticut (78.4%) had substantially higher rates of participation.

We would recommend that the Rhode Island Department of Education and the General Assembly do what they can to encourage more districts to participate in CEP, so all students in these schools can gain access to free school meals as part of the National School Lunch and National School Breakfast Programs.

More information about this program, including a list of eligible schools and districts and information about how to apply is available on the Rhode Island Department of Education's website at <http://www.ride.ri.gov/cnp/NutritionPrograms/NationalSchoolLunchProgram.aspx#2138986-community-eligibility-provision>. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) websites also include a great deal of information about the Community Eligibility Provision, its benefits, and how Rhode Island compares to other states.

We hope that this information is useful to the Committee and are happy to offer additional information as needed.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.