



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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Testimony Re: House Bill 5100 Regarding School Lunches

House Finance Committee

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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 5100 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).

As of October 1, 2018, 67,849 of Rhode Island's 143,247 public school students (47%) 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.

Over the past year, 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 have considered 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). 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. Nationally in 2016-2017, the median state's CEP take-up rate for eligible school districts was 47%. However, in Rhode Island less than one-third of all eligible schools were participating in CEP. Central Falls, all elementary schools in Providence, some schools in Pawtucket, Highlander Charter School, Rhode Island Nurses Institute Middle College Charter School, and the Metropolitan Regional

Career and Technical Center are using CEP. 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 including supporting of Article 15 of the Governor's proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2020, which would require that eligible schools participate in CEP unless doing so would present a financial hardship in which case they could apply for a limited waiver.

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>. 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.