



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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Testimony Re: Senate Bill 416 Regarding School Lunches

Senate Finance Committee

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Stephanie Geller, Deputy Director

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT believes that all children need access to school breakfast and school lunch so they have the nutrition they need to learn and grow. We want to thank Senator Cano for her leadership and also thank the other sponsors in the Senate, Senators Quezada, Metts, Crowley, and Nesselbush.

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.

Community Eligibility Provision

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.

During the current school year (the 2018-2019 school year), 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 were implementing CEP. However, many other schools are eligible to participate.

More information about the CEP program, including a list of eligible schools and districts in Rhode Island and information about how to apply is available on the Rhode Island Department of Education's website at

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<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 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.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports the No Student Hungry Initiative contained in Article 15 of the Governor’s proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2020. This initiative would require:

- (1) That eligible schools participate in CEP and offer free meals to all their children unless doing so would present a financial hardship in which case they can apply for a limited waiver
- (2) That all schools with 70% or more students identified as low-income offer alternative breakfast services, such as breakfast after the bell, “grab-and-go,” or breakfast in the classroom.

Supporting the No Student Hungry Initiative will ensure that more students, especially those in high-need schools, get the healthy breakfasts and lunches they need to learn and thrive.

I have attached our most recent Policy Brief, *Access to School Breakfast: A Key Strategy for Improving Children’s Health, Education, and Well-Being*. We hope that this information is useful 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.