



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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Testimony Re: House Bill 5931 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 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 on this important issue.

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, 2020, 64,025 of Rhode Island's 139,184 public school students (46%) were eligible to participate in the National School Lunch Program and obtain a free or reduced-price lunch. Sixty-nine percent of lunches served in Rhode Island are served free or reduced-priced. This program offers nutritious meals, which together with school breakfasts, make up a large proportion of the daily dietary intake of participating children.

Children who are undernourished 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.

Data from the Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey indicates that households with children are more likely to experience food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic than those without. National estimates project that the 2020 the child food insecurity rate will increase to 27-29% in Rhode Island due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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.

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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 support efforts to encourage districts and individual schools to participate in the CEP program for school meals by decreasing financial barriers to participation and to create new poverty measures for the education funding formula that do not rely on data collected from the school meal program application.

I have attached our recent Issue Brief, [*Child Hunger in Rhode Island*](#). 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.