



**RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT**

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**Testimony Re: House Bill 6665 Regarding School Lunches**  
**House Finance Committee**  
**June 14, 2022**  
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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 Representative Ranglin-Vassell for her leadership on this important issue and Representatives Carson, Donovan, Ajello, Hull, Potter, Alzate, Barros, Biah,, and Henries for co-sponsoring.

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, 2021, 56,812 of Rhode Island's 138,566 public school students (41%) 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.

During the 2020–2021 school year, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the vast majority of meals (99.4% of breakfasts and 99.8% of lunches in the U.S.) were offered to children at no charge. In Rhode Island, during the 2020-2021 school year, free breakfasts and lunches were available to all students, regardless of income

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.

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 supports 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.

We also encourage the state to evaluate the costs and benefits of providing free school meals to all students ,regardless of income. Data on how many children at different income levels took advantage of free meals during the COVID-19 pandemic should provide the information we need to assess the costs of this proposal. We know what the benefits would be.

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.

I have attached our 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.