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**Testimony in Support of House Bill 1152  
Public Schools—Student Meal Programs and Policies**

**Ways and Means Committee  
March 4, 2020  
1:00 PM**

**Cheryl Bost  
MSEA President**

The Maryland State Education Association supports House Bill 1152, which requires public schools to establish policies and procedures aimed at dealing with unpaid meal debt and preventing school lunch shaming in Maryland.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators and school employees who work in Maryland’s public schools, teaching and preparing our 896,837 students for careers and jobs of the future. MSEA also represents 39 local affiliates in every county across the state of Maryland, and our parent affiliate is the 3 million-member National Education Association (NEA).

Educators know all too well that, for far too many of our students, the only source of a nutritious meal they might have access to in a day is at their school. Few things are more gut wrenching to educators than seeing their students suffer, particularly for the want of the sufficient amount of food their growing bodies need to survive and thrive. Hungry children experience real and lasting health impacts that can put their physical, mental and cognitive development at risk as well as their social-emotional functioning. These impacts lead to deleterious effects such as poorer academic and behavioral outcomes for the children in our schools. Hungry children cannot be expected to fully engage in their learning if their attention is rapt by the rumbling and discomfort in their empty bellies.

According to Maryland Hunger Solutions<sup>1</sup>, during the 2018– 2019 school year, over 333,000 students in Maryland were eligible to receive free school meals, and over 51,000 were eligible to receive school meals at a reduced price. During that same timeframe, they also note that the amount of school lunch debt accrued by districts across the state of Maryland ranged from \$3,000 to almost \$100,000.<sup>2</sup> The issue of school lunch debt is not one being confronted by Maryland alone. Several states across the nation have sought legislative solutions to this problem, including California<sup>3</sup>, New Mexico<sup>4</sup>, and Minnesota<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, the No Shame at

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<sup>1</sup> <https://live-mdhungersolutions.pantheonsite.io/pdf/School-Meal-Charge-Policies-Maryland.pdf> (Accessed on February 16, 2020)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> [https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=201720180SB250](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180SB250) (Accessed on February 16, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/07/well/family/new-mexico-outlaws-school-lunch-shaming.html?emc=edit\\_tnt\\_20170407&nliid=49175802&ntemail0=y&referer](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/07/well/family/new-mexico-outlaws-school-lunch-shaming.html?emc=edit_tnt_20170407&nliid=49175802&ntemail0=y&referer) (Accessed on February 16, 2020)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hrd/bs/91/HF0055.pdf> (Accessed on February 16, 2020)



School Act (H.R. 3366)<sup>6</sup> has been introduced in the House of Representatives to deal with this problem on a nation level.

The passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 required the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to examine the need for national standards for unpaid school meal charges policies.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the USDA required all school districts to establish a policy by July 1, 2017, and to clearly communicate that policy to households at least once per year. Districts that participate in the Community Eligibility Program are not required to have a policy, given that all students are enrolled in the school meals program, therefore eliminating any school meal debt. Three Maryland counties that fall into this category are Dorchester, Somerset and Baltimore City. Of the remaining twenty-one counties, only eighteen have established written policies, leaving three districts that still allow for students with school lunch debt to be identified and possibly stigmatized or punished. The passage of HB 1152 would ensure that none of Maryland's public school students would ever have to endure shame and humiliation simply because their families either could not afford their school meal or because they fell behind in paying off their lunch debts.

Ensuring that children have access to healthy and nutritious meals at school is a significant investment in our state's most precious resource. Ensuring that no child in our public schools is ever made to suffer the shame and stigmatization associated with not having sufficient lunch or breakfast money is not only the right and conscionable thing to do, it is also the humane thing to do. **We urge a favorable report on House Bill 1152.**

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/3366> (Accessed on February 16, 2020)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/unpaid-meal-charges> (Accessed on February 16, 2020)