



## Maryland Hunger Solutions

*Ending hunger and promoting well-being*

To: Chair Anne R. Kaiser and Vice-Chair Alonzo T. Washington, Ways and Means Committee

From: Maryland Hunger Solutions

Re: Support for House Bill 1173

Date: February 26, 2020

Maryland Hunger Solutions urges your support of HB 1152, which requires schools to strengthen communications with households regarding student meal account balances and prohibits schools from responding to school meal debt with actions that overtly identify or stigmatize the student.

During the 2018–2019 school year, an average of over 250,000 breakfasts and 420,000 lunches were served to Maryland students every school day through the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program. These numbers represent the children and families that rely on these critical nutrition programs in Maryland. Unfortunately, there are instances during the year when students arrive to the cafeteria without the funds in their school meal account to pay for their meal. When this happens, school meal debt begins to accrue. While this might happen for a variety of reason, it is often the first indication that a family is struggling financially.

In response to the growing challenge of school meal debt, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) required all school districts that serve meals through the School Breakfast Program, National School Lunch Program, or both to establish and clearly communicate a local meal charge policy by July 1, 2017. Although USDA has issued guidance on developing strong policies, but there are no federal requirements for what must be included in the policy, nor are there baseline protections for children and families. Currently, Maryland does not have any state level standards or guidance for what school districts include in their policies.

Last year, we released a report, [\*School Meal Charge Policies in Maryland: Best Practices for Preventing School Meal Debt\*](#), which looks at meal charge policies in 21 out of Maryland's 24 school districts for school year 2018–2019. The three districts not included in the findings of this report are Baltimore City, Dorchester County, and Somerset County. **These districts use the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) districtwide to provide school meals at no charge to all of their students, effectively eliminating school meal debt and the need for a meal charge policy.** This report found that as of Spring 2019, 3 Maryland districts did not have a written policy as required by USDA, and only 10 were in compliance with the federal requirement to communicate their policy to families annually.

Among the policies that we found in Maryland, 14 districts allowed alternative meals to be served to students once a set amount of debt was reached; 9 allowed for communication regarding debt to be directed towards the student; 8 had different standards for meal charge allowances based on grade level; 3 allowed students with negative balances to be overly identified with pink slips, stickers, or notes from the cashier; 3 punished students with meal debt by barring access to student records or restricted

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participation in extracurricular activity; and 2 used debt collection agencies to recover debt from families.

Actions such as the ones listed above create a culture of stigma and shame for students in the cafeteria. We understand that school meal debt is a complicated issue. School food authorities are placed in an incredibly challenging situation in trying to responding to these situations with compassion while also continuing their operations with tight budgets and limited resources. While a greater systems change is needed along with more investment and support for the school meal programs, we should not continue to allow Maryland's children to be stigmatized during this process.

School meal debt is an issue that should never addressed at the expense of the child. HB 1152 takes the first step in changing the culture of school meal debt by ensuring that Maryland's children are protected from stigma, that the cafeteria is a positive and supportive environment for all students, and that the children of Maryland receive the nutritional support they need with the compassion and dignity they deserve.

Thank you for your consideration. Maryland Hunger Solutions **urges a favorable report on HB 1173.**

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