

**Testimony in SUPPORT of Senate Bill 971
Education – Concentration of Poverty Grant Program – School Lunch**

**Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
Senate Budget & Taxation Committee
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The Maryland State Education Association supports Senate Bill 971, which requires all schools receiving a per pupil grant under the Concentration of Poverty Grant Program to make school meals available to all students at no charge to the student or their family. Achieving, as outlined in this bill, universal meal programs is one of MSEA's legislative priorities in the 2022 Legislative Session.

MSEA represents 75,000 educators 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).

“Hungry children cannot be expected to fully engage in their learning if they are distracted by their empty bellies. By ensuring that all students have access to healthy school meals, we are making a significant investment in our state's most precious resource. Providing every child in our state with the nutritious meal their growing bodies need to thrive not only helps them be better prepared to learn, it's also the right and humane thing to do.”

- Cheryl Bost, President, Maryland State Education Association

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.

This bill pairs nicely with the work the General Assembly has done through the Blueprint for Maryland's Future and builds on the last decade of meal expansion bills for students. The General Assembly and education advocates have worked in tandem



to bring greater focus to community schools and to provide targeted resources to students living in concentrated poverty. 45% of Maryland students now live in poverty and unfortunately that number has grown in the last debate. As we work to stand-up these community schools around the state with important wrap around services, universal meals is another piece of that puzzle. Universal meals as outlined here reduce administrative burden, reduce meal shaming amongst students, and ensure that students are ready to learn with full bellies.

Senate Bill 971 requires all eligible schools to apply to the United State Department of Agriculture's Community Eligibility Provision program, ensuring that schools are taking advantage of as much federal funding as possible. While this bill would also require a mandated appropriation for any funding not covered by the federal government, that's a worthy investment. MSEA continues to look for ways to work with the General Assembly, the Maryland State Department of Education, and Maryland's federal delegation on ways to better count students in poverty than the Free and Reduced Price Meals forms, and ensure that there is no question on penalties for not collecting those forms.

The State must do whatever practicable to make feeding children easier and this bill is a meaningful effort toward that goal.

MSEA urges a favorable report on Senate Bill 971.