



March 14, 2022

2022 SESSION SUPPORT TESTIMONY
SB 0971: Education - Concentration of Poverty School Grant
Program - School Lunch

BILL: SB0971: Education - Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program - School Lunch
COMMITTEE: Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs
POSITION: Testimony of Support of Senate Bill 0971
BILL ANALYSIS: This bill will grant free school lunch to students who attend schools eligible for the Concentration of Poverty Grant Program. County boards of education will be prohibited from charging students for school lunches at eligible schools. Additional funding will be set aside to provide free school meals to students who do not attend eligible schools.

Dear Chair Pinsky and Members of the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee,

The Montgomery County Food Council strongly urges you to support SB 971 Education - Concentration of Poverty School Grant Program - School Lunch, which will provide free school lunches to students who attend schools eligible for the Concentration of Poverty Grant Program. This bill will be instrumental in reducing food insecurity for thousands of students and avoid the potential social marginalization of students in need of food assistance. The Food Council views this bill as an important step toward school readiness and success for all students, by reducing cost and social barriers that prevent some children from accessing proper nutrition needed during the school day.

The Food Council highly prioritizes building a more equitable food system in Maryland. This bill will help alleviate stark racial disparities in food access in our state by guaranteeing students receive a nutritious lunch in areas with high concentrations of poverty. As we look to create a more resilient food system following historically high food insecurity rates during the Covid-19 pandemic, which many residents still and will continue to experience, it is imperative we ensure students can access a nutritious school lunch during the day. By allocating funding specifically toward Community Schools, where student populations experience higher rates of food insecurity, we can make a strategic and significant impact on child hunger in our state.



Many students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch also feel stigmatized and vulnerable compared to other students who don't receive the benefit, leading many not to use it at all to avoid drawing attention to their need.¹ Making school meals free at eligible schools will eliminate this social barrier many students feel when in need of food assistance.

The science is clear-- school meals are crucial for children's cognitive development and overall health and are essential to provide the energy to remain engaged throughout the school day.² It is time to remove barriers for Maryland students most in need to make sure their potential is not limited by hunger. That is why the Food Council is in strong support of **SB0071** and urges a favorable report **FOR** this bill.

The Montgomery County Food Council is a nonprofit organization that serves as the primary connection point for businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, and residents around food system issues in our County. We bring together over 2,000 local and regional partners in community-wide education, advocacy, and capacity building initiatives. Our work cultivates a more resilient, sustainable, and equitable local food system by enhancing food access for the over 100,000 at risk for hunger, expanding food education opportunities for all residents, supporting our County's farms and food and beverage businesses, and addressing the impact of local food production, distribution, consumption and recycling on our natural resources.

For more information, please contact: Heather Bruskin, MCFC Executive Director at the email and phone number below.

¹ Ford Foundation, 2017 "Fighting the stigma of free lunch: Why universal free school lunch is good for students, schools, and families"

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021 "Childhood Nutrition Facts"

