



**TESTIMONY OF THE CRITICAL ISSUES FORUM (CIF) OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND  
BEFORE THE SENATE BUDGET AND TAXATION COMMITTEE  
IN SUPPORT OF SB 559: MARYLAND MEALS FOR ACHIEVEMENT  
IN-CLASSROOM BREAKFAST PROGRAM - ANNUAL APPROPRIATION  
FEBRUARY 22, 2023**

**FAVORABLE**

CIF is a coalition of three synagogues in Montgomery County, Kol Shalom, Adat Shalom, and Temple Beth Ami, that include over 1750 households and three denominations of Judaism: Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist. CIF serves as a vehicle for our congregations to speak out on policy issues, such as food insecurity, that relate to our shared values, including the Jewish traditions that emphasize the sanctity and primacy of human life. CIF provides this testimony in support of SB 559, which would fully fund the Maryland Meals for Achievement In-Classroom Breakfast Program (MMFA), and thus permit more high-poverty schools to offer universal free breakfast after the bell to their students. It is no secret that hunger challenges a child's ability to learn.

CIF recognizes that even before the COVID pandemic, there were a large number of families, particularly families of color, that struggled with food insecurity. The pandemic only increased the number of families struggling with covering basic needs, such as food. According to the FRAC dashboard of August 2022 (based on the USDA Household Pulse Survey), 14.9% of Black households, 16.3% of Latinx households, and 13.8% of households with a high school education or less in Maryland were food insufficient. Recent inflation and rising food costs have been particularly challenging for families with limited incomes. Research shows that hungry children do not learn as well as children who are well-nourished, and hunger also affects their physical and emotional well-being. Food Research and Action Center (2021), "School Meals are Essential for Student Health and Learning," available at <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning.pdf>.

A report of the Council of Economic Advisors, Executive Office of the President of the United States (December 2015) emphasizes that for children especially "the costs extend beyond the immediate concerns for hunger; insufficient access to food jeopardizes children's long-term health, educational performance and life chances." The report specifies that food insecurity among children has been associated with numerous adverse health and developmental outcomes, including iron deficiency anemia, poor academic performance, and behavioral

issues. [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/documents/SNAP\\_report\\_final\\_nonembargo.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/documents/SNAP_report_final_nonembargo.pdf). The evidence of the harms of food insecurity among children is overwhelming. More specifically, the Food Research and Action Center has identified numerous studies that support the beneficial, cumulative effects of **breakfast** on students' health and learning, including universal, free breakfast in the classroom. FRAC Research Brief: Breakfast for Health (October 2016); FRAC Research Brief: Breakfast for Learning (October 2016).

Fortunately, research also shows that participation in government nutrition programs, including school meals programs, supports children's health and learning. One such proven program is Maryland Meals for Achievement (MMFA). MMFA currently provides state funding to allow certain, but not all, high-poverty schools to serve free breakfast to **all students, in the classroom**. MMFA thus increases access to this all-important meal because it eliminates any cost of the meal for all families, reduces the stigma for those students who had been receiving a free or reduced-price breakfast, and does not require that breakfast be served in the cafeteria before the start of the school day. Research has shown that students at MMFA schools have increased participation in the school breakfast program, and demonstrate better educational performance, improved health, and fewer behavioral issues. See <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED523998.pdf>.

SB 559 would enhance the effectiveness of this successful program by providing the necessary funding for **all** eligible schools, including those schools currently on the waiting list, to participate. Under current funding levels, 616 Maryland schools participate in MMFA. An additional \$4.5 million would allow 123 more schools to participate.

Members of CIF were privileged to attend the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of MMFA at South Lake Elementary School in Gaithersburg. At that school-wide event, students, teachers, and administrative staff extolled the value of offering universal, free breakfast in the classroom. We witnessed first-hand children eating a nutritious breakfast and learning together in their classrooms at the start of the school day.

This is one timely, cost-effective step the State can take to provide access to a nutritious breakfast to our most needy students. Nearly 64% of students in MMFA schools participate in the school breakfast program, compared to 31% in other Maryland schools. **This morning meal makes a difference.**

**The Critical Issues Forum respectfully requests a favorable report on SB 559.**

