

**To:** Chairman Marvin L. Abney and House Finance Committee Members  
**From:** Jason Kashdan, MS  
**Re:** Testimony in Support of S2320/H7400 an Act Relating to Education – Federal Aid, to Fund Healthy School Meals for All in the F25 Budget  
**Date:** March 7, 2024

Dear Chairman Abney and Esteemed House Finance Committee Members,

My name is Jason Kashdan from Providence House District 4. I am writing to express my support for H7400 to fund Healthy School Meals for All (HSMFA) in the F25 Budget.

### **Why does Rhode Island (RI) need HSMFA legislation now?**

Although 85% of breakfasts and about 70% of school lunches are served for free or at a reduced-price, RI's school meals program does not reach every child who faces food insufficiency<sup>1</sup>. Some vulnerable children are ineligible for school food assistance because their family does not meet federal income thresholds.

Additionally, 81,000 households in RI had their benefits reduced to just \$6 per person, per day after Congress ended federal pandemic waivers last year<sup>2</sup>. For some working parents, that meant seeking additional income to make up for lost Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) dollars and risk their children losing access to free or reduced-price school meals because of that additional income.

And in the not-too-distant past, some RI districts subjected children to “lunch shaming.” School program administrators came under national fire in 2019 after Warwick Public Schools announced that students with lunch debt would be denied a hot meal, and instead served a sunflower butter and jelly sandwich<sup>3</sup>.

U.S. school meal programs are a key driver to improve food insecurity for children<sup>4</sup>. Breakfasts and lunches served at school are more nutritious than meals obtained elsewhere and are critical intervention points to combat the childhood obesity epidemic<sup>5</sup>. This is especially true for children from low-income households. Access to quality meals improves kids' concentration in the classroom and contributes to better academic performance<sup>6</sup>. And when support to provide kids free, healthy school meals is cut, students, particularly from Black, Latino, and Native American families, suffer<sup>7</sup>.

### **How can RI maximize federal dollars to fund HSMFA?**

Schools that opt in to the national Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) provide meals free of charge regardless of students' household income, making CEP the most equitable option. But the state is missing out on funds to operate a HSMFA program by not optimizing the way they participate.

By participating as a group of schools or as a whole district as opposed to individual schools, the state could count on a larger federal reimbursement to cover the entire cost of all meals served students. In the 2022-2023 school year, RI's percentage of eligible schools using CEP was below the national average. Only 77.3% of eligible schools had adopted CEP compared to 82% nationwide<sup>8</sup>.

### **Lessons from states with successful HSMFA programs**

Rhode Island was one of 33 states that used momentum from the pandemic meal waivers to introduce HSMFA legislation<sup>9</sup>. As of March 2024, only California, Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, Maine, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Vermont have been successful in funding their policies. Nearly all eight states require eligible schools to maximize federal meal reimbursements through CEP. As recommended in H7400, RI must follow suit and also take advantage of additional funding sources.

During Maine's first year operating HSMFA, it was awarded \$10 million from the USDA Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative<sup>10</sup>. The program accepts applications from organizations that manage and distribute sub-grants to small and rural school meal programs. Eligible organizations in RI should be encouraged to apply.

California recommends schools sell foods outside of traditional breakfast and lunch to increase nutrition program revenue. In RI, schools could use revenue from a RIDE initiative called Menu for Success<sup>11</sup>. At the beginning of SY 2023-2024, the state invested \$1.625 million to provide food trucks to 13 districts, over half of which are eligible to participate in CEP.

It's also time for RI to invest a greater share of school meal dollars into scratch cooking and local food purchasing. Like Vermont and Maine, RI has a robust food system<sup>12, 13</sup>. Yet more than one-in-ten school districts are not serving local foods, and less than half serve local vegetables at least once a week<sup>14</sup>. Students are more likely to eat meals from farm-to-school programs, and enjoy greater access to fresh, nutrient-dense foods, while schools generate increased revenue and decrease meal programming costs<sup>15, 16, 17</sup>. Free resources and grants from organizations like the Chef Ann Foundation can help RI schools improve kitchen facility infrastructure, support budgets for staff training, and diversify menus.

### **Conclusion**

Making school meals free to all students is a logical and long-overdue strategy. When President Harry Truman established the National School Lunch Program in 1946, he affirmed that "safeguarding the health of the well-being of the Nation's children," by supporting states' efforts to offer healthy meals was a measure of national security. Passing Healthy School Meals for All legislation will establish a much-needed, permanent funding system and guarantee equitable food access to children in Rhode Island.

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