

JOCELYN P. ANTONIO, MPH

House Committee on Finance

State of Rhode Island General Assembly

March 6, 2024

Good afternoon, Chairman Abney and members of the House Committee on Finance. My name is Jocelyn Antonio, and I am the Director of Program Implementation and Policy at the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute at the Brown University School of Public Health, I am providing this testimony in my individual capacity.

I strongly urge your favorable consideration and passage of House Bill H-7400 – An Act Relating to Education – Federal Aid, sponsored by Representative Caldwell and co-sponsored by Representatives Batista, Stewart, Handy, McNamara, McGaw, Speakman, Kislak, Ajello, and Morales.

This bill proposes the visionary step of creating a universal school breakfast and lunch program that would provide free meals to all Rhode Island students attending all public schools, regardless of the student's financial status. This program is not just about food; it's about investing in the future of all children in Rhode Island, our state's collective well-being, and our economic prosperity.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the stark reality of food insecurity for many families in our country including those in our state. The reality was, and continues to be, that for many children school meals may be the only meals they get in a day. Between school years 2020 and 2022, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) was granted authority to implement waivers that provided universal free school meals to all students. Since that policy ended in the school year 2022-2023, House Bill H-7400 would turn a temporary solution into a permanent state investment in the future of Rhode Island's children and families.

Universal school meals are not just about providing food to children, they're about improving academic performance and attendance, promoting sociability among students, enhancing health outcomes, boosting student participation in school meals, and preventing students from feeling stigmatized for receiving free or reduced-priced school meals or not being able to pay for them. You simply cannot perform at your best if you are hungry.

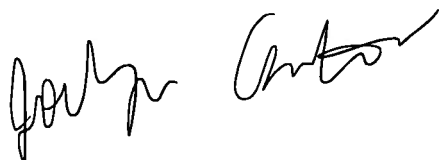
The Governor's Proposed Budget for fiscal year 2025 aims to provide free school meals to about 6,500 students who are currently eligible for reduced-price school meals. This bill would complement that investment by including funding for free school meals for all children.

This legislation will enable Rhode Island to join nine states in our nation that have already implemented statewide universal school meals. California, Maine, and Colorado are showing that the continuation of universal school meal programs beyond the pandemic is effective and crucial to the well-being of children and families. Rhode Island can help lead a national movement.

House Bill H-7400 is more than just another row in the state's budget; it's an investment in the well-being, health, and potential of every child in Rhode Island. As a person who received free school meals during my K-12 schooling, I sit before you all today as the result of that investment.

I respectfully urge your favorable consideration and passage of this important bill for the nourishment of the minds, bodies, and dreams of the children of Rhode Island of the present and future.

Thank you for your time,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jocelyn Antonio", written in a cursive style.

Jocelyn P. Antonio, MPH