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Testimony Re: House Bill 7400 - Healthy School Meals for All
House Finance Committee

March 7, 2024

Stephanie Geller, Deputy Director

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is part of the **Healthy School Meals for All Coalition**. Today I'm here to voice our strong support for House Bill 7400, the Healthy School Meals for All Bill. I'd like to thank Representative Caldwell for sponsoring this bill and Representatives Batista, Stewart, Handy, McNamara, McGaw, Speakman, Kislak, Ajello, and Morales for co-sponsoring.

We would also like to thank Governor McKee for including a proposal to help children access free school meals in his FY 2025 budget, however, we do not feel this proposal goes far enough. It does not include the funds needed to provide free and healthy school meals to all public school students, an investment that Rhode Islanders overwhelmingly support and that is needed to fight hunger and ensure that children are ready to learn.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the USDA provided funding for schools to offer meals free of charge to all students. In Rhode Island, schools offered free breakfast and lunch to all students during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, but the federal pandemic waiver ended in June 2022, and school meals are once again offered under a tiered system where students receive free, reduced-price, or full-price meals depending on their family's income. Schools are back to collecting school meal applications and incurring and trying to collect school meal debt from families with incomes that may be just over the income cutoff or that simply did not complete the required forms. This system creates stress and work for families and schools.

Many other states have made Healthy School Meals for All permanent. These states include our neighbors in Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont and farther afield, California, Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, and New Mexico. And many other states are considering legislation to make healthy meals free for all school children.

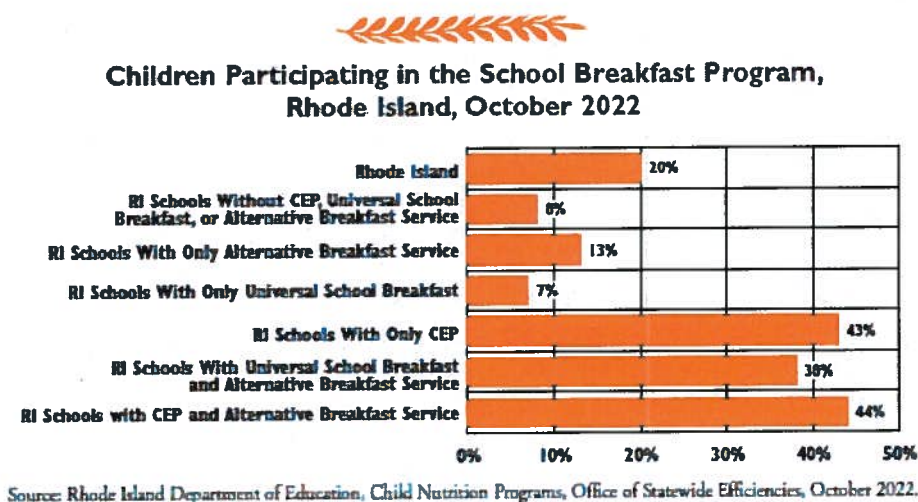
Why are so many states considering Healthy School Meals for All legislation – because it simply makes sense for our kids, our schools, and our state.

Children cannot learn on an empty stomach. According to the RI Life Index, a survey conducted by Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and Brown University, more than one-third (38%) of Rhode Island households with children are food insecure. Children who are hungry are more likely to have behavior, emotional, and academic problems and are more likely to be tardy or absent from school, be suspended, and repeat a grade.

Providing school meals to all students will reduce stigma and improve equity. Providing free meals to all students increases school meal participation by removing the stigma often associated with school meals.

Providing school meals to all students would reduce administrative costs. Schools spend a tremendous amount of time and effort collecting and processing school meal applications and collecting unpaid school meal debt. This bill would ease the administrative burden for schools and end the problem of unpaid school meal debt.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT has been encouraging schools to adopt policies and practices that improve school breakfast participation for a long time, including breakfast in the classroom, breakfast after the bell, universal school breakfast, and the Community Eligibility Provision. We have been focused on this issue because we know that access to healthy school meals supports academic success and improves attendance, behavior, and health, including reducing obesity rates.



This bill includes provisions that will maximize federal funds available to support school meal programs and encourage models like breakfast in the classroom and grab-and-go breakfasts that allow more children to participate.

We urge this committee to pass this bill so all children in Rhode Island have access to the nutritious school meals they need to learn and thrive. Healthy School Meals for All is a key ingredient our state needs to improve educational outcomes. RIDE estimates that the fiscal impact of this bill to be \$35 million. We think our children and our schools are worth it.

Thank you for investing in the health and well-being of Rhode Island's children and for the opportunity to provide this testimony.