

March 5, 2024

Rhode Island House Committee on Finance

RE: House Bill S2320/H7400; Support of Healthy School Meals for All

Dear Members of the Committee:

I am an Associate Professor in the Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences at Brown University's School of Public Health. My research for the past 15 years has been on the promotion of healthy eating, especially among historically marginalized communities. I am also a Board Member of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. I write in strong support of Representative bill S2320/H7400, which will make school breakfast and lunch available to all public-school students in Rhode Island without charge.

There is recent and compelling evidence to demonstrate that making school breakfast and lunch available to all public-school students can improve academic performance. In fact, one 2019 study in New York city found that free school lunch led to improvements in academic performance equal to up to 10 extra weeks of learning.¹ In addition, studies have shown that free school meals can improve the nutritional intake of children, particularly those from low-income families who may not have access to nutritious meals at home.² This can help prevent chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease which lead to enormous healthcare costs in our state.

National and local food insecurity is at an all-time high. More and more families in Rhode Island can't afford adequate food. In the past year, the rate of food insecurity among families with children in Rhode Island grew significantly from 25 percent to 41 percent. At the same time, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of people served at food pantries and meal sites that are member agencies of the Food Bank. In March 2023, 79,000 people received emergency food assistance, as compared to 64,000 one year earlier in March 2022. **We need policy action to reverse this trend – food pantries cannot be the only solution.**

Food insecurity is increasing due to the high cost of food and recent reductions in federal benefits. Several Covid-19 relief programs ended this year: the enhanced Child Tax Credit, emergency SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits, and free school meals for all students. The SNAP cuts alone will result in \$156 million fewer dollars that low-income families in Rhode Island have to spend on food in the coming year (\$13 million per month less). The estimated \$35 million price tag for Healthy School Meals for All pales in comparison to this loss of funds.

The federal program that offered school breakfast and lunch at no charge ended in June 2022. Since then, participation in school meals in Rhode Island has decreased significantly. Thousands

¹ Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance. Amy Ellen Schwartz & Michah W. Rothbart Paper No. 203. July 2019 (Revised from December 2017)

² Junxiu Liu, PhD1,2; Renata Micha, RD, PhD2; Yan Li, PhD1,3; et al. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. JAMA Network Open. 2021.

of children lost a daily source of good nutrition, which is vital to their health, development, and learning.

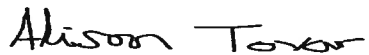
School meals for all is also an economically viable solution that will save money in the short and long term. School meal programs generate a more than 2 times return on investment and universal school meals can boost lifetime earnings. They have better school performance, which helps them to obtain higher-income careers and levels the playing field for a generation of future leaders. In addition, school meals for all will eliminate eligibility paperwork and lead to administrative cost savings.

It is time for Rhode Island to lead and ensure our children are hunger-free and ready to learn. With continued inaction at the federal level, states are stepping up to fill the gap. Eight states have already made Healthy School Meals for All permanent including: Maine, California, Minnesota, Colorado, New Mexico, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Vermont. An additional 26 states have bills introduced and/or advocacy coalitions formed. Serving school meals to all students at no cost on a permanent basis would be a gamechanger for students, families, and schools in our state, just as it has been for our neighbors.

Rhode Island should act now to protect children from hunger by using state funds to reinstate the program that made school breakfast and lunch free for all students during the pandemic. Healthy School Meals for All will increase participation in school meals, improve food security, and support academic achievement for all students in Rhode Island. I urge you to pass this important piece of legislation.

Sincerely,

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