



March 6, 2024

House Finance Committee

RE: H7400 Healthy School Meals For All

Representative Marvin L. Abney, Representative Scott A. Slater, Representative Alex Marszalkowski, and esteemed Rhode Island General Assembly members of the House Finance Committee, I am writing on behalf of New England Dairy & Food Council regarding **H7400, Healthy School Meals For All** (also known as Universal School Meals). Our organization, and the dairy farmers who fund us, support school meal programs because they help decrease food insecurity and ensure kids have access to balanced, nutrient-rich meals that include milk and other dairy foods. By law, our organizations cannot take a position on legislation, but we would like to share information on the importance of school meals.

Addressing Food Insecurity:

- School meals are the second largest food assistance program in our country.
- Nearly all studies examining universal free school meals found positive associations with school meal participation. Most studies examining universal free school meals that included free lunch found positive associations with diet quality, food security, and academic performance; however, the findings of studies examining only universal free breakfast were mixed.¹

Improving Nutrition:

- Research shows that students who participate in the school meal programs consume more whole grains, milk, fruits, and vegetables during mealtimes and have better overall diet quality, than nonparticipants.^{2,3}
- An evaluation of U.S. research studies from 2010-2015 found that the nutrient content of elementary, middle, and preschool packed lunches brought from home contained more calories, fat, saturated fat, desserts, and sugar-sweetened beverages than school lunches.⁴
- Meals served through these programs must meet specific nutrition requirements. These requirements were revised in 2012 to include more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains and to decrease the amount of sodium and trans-fat.

Supporting Student Success:

- Numerous studies have linked the benefits of nutrition for growing children and adolescents to physical health, behavioral health, cognitive performance,



and academic achievement. Food insecurity and malnutrition correlate closely with social emotional and academic problems. Integrating a healthy diet, physically active lifestyle, and adequate sleep may provide optimal circumstances for brain development and learning.⁵

- When students consistently start their school day with a nutritious meal, such as school breakfast, they have significantly fewer absences, an average of 17.5 percent increase in standardized math scores, are 50 percent less likely to repeat a grade, and have a 20 percent better chance of graduating high school.⁶

For all these reasons, school meals can dramatically change the lives of kids living with hunger right now and in the future.

Sincerely,

Jane Q. Vergnani, RDN, LDN
Sr. School Nutrition Specialist
New England Dairy & Food Council
jvergnani@NewEnglandDairy.com
(401) 667-3991

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