



Dear Chairman and Esteemed Committee Members,

March 6, 2024

Support House Bill 7400.

The Rhode Island School Nurse Association respectfully requests that you support (H7400) and fund Healthy School Meals for All (also known as Universal Free School Meals) in the FY25 Budget. Healthy School Meals for All means offering free breakfast and lunch to all students, regardless of their household income, as part of the school day so they can learn and thrive. Healthy School Meals for All is an important step toward increasing equity in our schools, investing in education, and streamlining school nutrition programs.

During the pandemic (March 2020 – June 2022), the USDA provided funding for schools to offer meals free of charge to all students. This effectively served as a successful trial run of a Healthy School Meals for All policy. Regrettably, the federal pandemic waivers expired prior to the start of the 22-23 school year and school meal programs are once again operating under a tiered payment system of free, reduced-price, or full-price meals depending on family income eligibility.

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 game-changer for students, families, and schools in our state, just as it has been for our neighbors.

As school nurses, we witness students battling food insecurities in our schools daily. They come to school hungry and come to our clinics with stomach aches, nausea, headaches, and even overall fatigue - upon assessment, we find that they have not eaten breakfast. They have been told by their parent(s) not to obtain breakfast at school because it is "too expensive," and/or told "you'll be fine" and are expected to learn and thrive the same way a well-nourished student would. This results in the financial burden of feeding these students on the school nurses and therefore places the cost on the overall school budgets.

High food prices continue to take a toll on both low-income and moderate-income families in our state. According to findings from the RI Life Index, food insecurity remains close to the same high level found last year, with 29% of households reporting that they cannot afford adequate food. The risk of hunger is even greater for households with children at 38%. This crisis has health, educational, and economic consequences, leaving children particularly vulnerable to the long-term impact. Food insecurity can lead to a variety of negative health conditions, including diet-related diseases, and severe consequences on a child's future health. School meals are an important source of nutrition and a safeguard against chronic food insecurity. Healthy School Meals for All will benefit thousands of students each day and be a major step forward in eliminating health and education inequities.

Key points to remember:

- On average, students who eat school breakfast have been shown to achieve 17.5% higher scores on standardized math tests and attend 1.5 more days of school per year (School Nutrition Association, 2024).
- Reduces prevalence of child hunger and food insecurity, while also reducing stigma associated with eating school meals.
- Ensures all students are well-nourished and ready to learn, supporting overall well-being.
- Improves learning outcomes and attendance rates.
- Ends the problem of unpaid school meal debt.
- Eases administrative burden for schools, and supports school nutrition finances and operations.

Please support (S2320/H7400) and fund Healthy School Meals for All in the FY25 Budget to ensure ALL Rhode Island children can thrive and succeed. The budget needed to support this initiative could be minimized if the state required that school districts maximize access to federal funds by participating in the Community Eligibility Provision, known as CEP, or other federal options. The cost of this expansion is estimated to be \$35 million. We believe our children and our schools are worth it – and Rhode Islanders do too. According to the Rhode Island Survey Initiative led by the University of Rhode Island's Harrington School for Communication and Media; the Social Science Institute for Research, Education, and Policy; and the Department of Political Science; 68% approve of legislation that requires free lunches to be provided for all K-12 students attending public schools.

Sincerely,

Rhode Island Certified School Nurse Association

References

- i 2023 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island, Rhode Island Community Food Bank, 2023. 2023-RICFB-StatusReport-FINAL-digital.pdf (rifoodbank.org)
- ii Institute for Research, Education, and Policy; and Department of Political Science, 2023. https://web.uri.edu/harrington/wp-content/uploads/sites/2164/RI-Survey_Results_2023-1.pdf
- iii RI Life Index, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and Brown University School of Public Health, 2023.
- iv Rhode Island Survey Initiative, University of Rhode Island Harrington School for Communication and Media; Social Science
- v School Nutrition Association . (2024). *School meal statistics*. School Nutrition Association. <https://schoolnutrition.org/about-school-meals/school-meal-statistics/>