



March 6, 2024

The Honorable Marvin L. Abney

Rhode Island House Committee on Finance

RE: House Bill 7400; Support of Healthy School Meals for All

Dear Chair Abney and members of the Committee:

As the CEO of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank, I write in strong support of Representative Caldwell's bill 7400, which will make school breakfast and lunch available to all public-school students in Rhode Island without charge.

Thousands of families in Rhode Island cannot afford adequate food. According to the RI Life Index, produced by the Brown University School of Public Health and Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island, 38 percent of households with children are food insecure.

More and more Rhode Islanders are turning to food pantries and meal sites to feed their families. The number of people served per month at member agencies of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank increased from 63,000 in 2022 to 79,000 in 2023. Over one-third of those served at food pantries are families with children.

During the pandemic, Congress allowed schools to provide breakfast and lunch meals to all students at no charge. When the federal authorization for this program ended in June 2022, schools in Rhode Island returned to a tiered fee system (free, reduced-price, full price), charging parents for school meals based on their household income.

For a student to qualify for free meals, the household must be at or below 130% of the federal poverty level (\$39,000 for a family of four). Because this income cut-off is so low, many families that don't qualify for free meals can't afford to pay school meal fees, which means that their children go without school breakfast and lunch.

Participation in school meals decreased significantly in Rhode Island when the tiered system returned in School Year 2022-23, as compared to when meals were free for all students in School Year 2021-22. Average daily participation in lunch decreased from 76,000 to 65,000 students, a 15 percent decline. Average daily participation in breakfast decreased from 39,000 to 28,000 students, a 27 percent drop.

Governor McKee, in his proposed budget for FY25, removed the reduced-price category, making 6,500 children eligible for free school meals. While commendable, the Governor's proposal does not go far enough. If we want to ensure that every child who is hungry at school has access to school breakfast and lunch, then all public-school students should receive these meals without charge.

In states that funded free school meals for all students after the pandemic-era program ended, participation in breakfast and lunch continued to grow. Eight states, including California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont, have now instituted a permanent free school meal policy.

Rhode Island should act now to protect children from hunger by using state funds, and maximizing federal reimbursements, 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew Schiff", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Andrew Schiff
CEO