



April 28, 2025

The Honorable Marvin L. Abney
Rhode Island House Committee on Finance
RE: House Bill 5742; 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 5742, which will make school breakfast and lunch available to 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, 36 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 at member agencies of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank increased from 55,000 per month before the pandemic to 89,000 per month today. 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.

This school year, over 6,000 children became eligible for free school meals after Rhode Island removed the reduced-price category. Even with this small change, the results have been impressive. Participation in school lunch increased by 3 percent (from 69,990 children participating to 72,000 children participating each day) and school breakfast participation increased by 6 percent (from 32,300 children participating to 34,400 children participating each day).

We support the three-year phase in of Healthy School Meals for All proposed in House Bill 5742, beginning with all elementary school students. Healthy School Meals for All will increase participation in school meals, improve food security, and support academic achievement in Rhode Island. I urge you to pass this important piece of legislation.

Sincerely,

Andrew Schiff
CEO

Healthy School Meals for All

Healthy School Meals for All (also known as Universal Free School Meals) is a policy that ensures all public-school students have access to breakfast and lunch at no cost as part of the school day, regardless of their household income, so they can learn and thrive.

Research shows that *Healthy School Meals for All* policies reduce food insecurity, improve nutrition and academic performance and generate much-needed revenue for school nutrition programs. School meals are an integral part of the school day and should be no different than access to textbooks, technology, busing, and health services that are provided to all students without cost.

Eight states (California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont) have permanent *Healthy School Meals for All* programs with similar legislation introduced in many additional states.



***** IT'S TIME FOR RHODE ISLAND TO ACT *****

Please prioritize our children, families, and schools – support Senate Bill S0430 (Vargas) and House Bill H5742 (Caldwell) that would phase in *Healthy School Meals for All* over three years starting with elementary schools in the 2025-2026 school year, followed by middle schools in 2026-2027, and high schools in 2027-2028.

Reduces Food Insecurity and Improves Learning



School meals play a critical role in student health, well-being, and academic success. Increasing access to school meals alleviates hunger, supports good nutrition, and positively impacts attendance, behavior, and cognition, particularly in the 36% of RI households with children who are food-insecure. (2024 RI Life Index)

No More Stigma in the Cafeteria



When all students can eat for free without concern for whether a parent/guardian has provided money for meals or completed a qualified meal benefit application, stress and stigma vanish. The children who need meals the most don't feel singled out. All students become equal in the cafe. No child should have to prove they are worthy of nutritious food.

Elimination of Meal Debt



Student meal debt in schools across RI has ballooned following the end of the federal free meal program during the pandemic. School districts must often pay off this debt with general education funds when student unpaid meal accounts aren't cleared. Turning educators into "bill collectors" isn't compatible with building positive and productive relationships between schools and families.

Federal income guidelines for free/reduced-price meals are nowhere near sufficient to meet the needs of struggling families. The meal benefit application process can also be intimidating, confusing, or shameful for some families.

Better Quality Meal Programs



Schools can better invest in food service programs as a result of greater participation with increased reimbursement. New equipment, staffing, local food, and more wholesome scratch cooking can be budgeted. With less of an administrative burden, programs can spend more time on engaging students in menu development, taste tests, and the cafeteria experience.

How will Healthy School Meals for All be funded in RI?

Federal funds through meal reimbursements will be maximized through United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs such as the Community Eligibility Program (CEP) and Provision 2. These programs allow schools to claim the highest number of meals and be reimbursed at the Federal "free" rate, based on established need, with zero state contribution. For meals that cannot be reimbursed at the Federal "free" rate, the state will reimburse educational entities the difference between the federal reimbursement rate for students who qualify for free meals and the rate the federal government reimburses for students who are full pay.

The State Education Aid formula no longer uses meal benefit applications to determine student poverty levels so an HSMA program would have no impact on state education funding.



rischoolmeals4all.com

CONTACT:

Megan Tucker, American Heart Association
megan.tucker@heart.org

Mary Barden, National Education Association RI
mbarden@neari.org