



Mayor of Providence

Brett P. Smiley

April 29, 2025

The Honorable Marvin L. Abney
House Finance Committee
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith Street
Providence RI, 02903

Dear Chair Abney and Honorable Members of the Committee:

I am writing in support of House Bill 5742, *An Act Relating to Education – Federal Aid*. If passed, this bill would establish a statewide Healthy School Meals for All program to provide all public school students with access to breakfast and lunch by 2028, through a three-year phase-in period. The legislation directs school districts to utilize identified federal funds to offset program costs for districts and minimize the financial burden on the state.

Access to school breakfast and lunch provides children and youth with critical academic, quality of life, and public health benefits that set them up for success during and after their time in school. When students have reliable access to meals at school, they perform better academically and experience fewer behavioral issues. Children are also less likely to be absent or late when food security is provided by their school. Nutritious meals throughout the school day help reduce physical health risks for students—including obesity, diabetes, and other chronic conditions later in life.

While Rhode Island already provides some students with free meals through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National School Lunch Program, these offerings do not adequately cover many Providence Public School students. For example, a single-parent household with two children earning \$35,000 would be ineligible for free meals. Students from low- and middle-income households who do not qualify for free meals often have poorer nutrition. Within school, these students tend to consume more sugar and saturated fats than their peers who have access to nutritious meals. Outside of school, they are more likely to rely on inexpensive fast food and snacks that are detrimental to their health. Additionally, many students experience bullying and stigma related to their meal status, which harms their well-being and mental health. Expanding free meals to all students can help reduce these stigmas and eliminate divisions between children at a critical stage of development.

I thank Representative Caldwell for sponsoring H5742 and respectfully urge the committee to vote in favor of this important legislation.

Sincerely,

Brett P. Smiley
Mayor