

Dear Representative Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee,

As a professor of sociology focused on food systems, I support H5742. The Healthy School Meals for All Initiative will not only alleviate child hunger, but also improve educational outcomes and strengthen the local economy.

The passage of H5742 will ensure that all public school students in Rhode Island have access to breakfast and lunch, regardless of their family's income. Similar programs in Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont and California have been showing the success of investing in nutritious food for children.

In the absence of universal school meals, children with family incomes below the federal benchmarks are the only ones who qualify for free or reduced-priced breakfast and lunch. These children often face stigma and shame, because their free lunch signals their family's very low income. At the same time, many families with low and moderate incomes that make too much money to qualify for the federal program still struggle to afford enough healthy food for their kids. Some families accrue school meal debt when their kids are allowed to eat lunch, but it is later determined that they don't qualify for a free meal and yet they can't afford to pay for it. Providing healthy meals for all students, no matter how much their families make, solves both problems and increases participation in school lunches across the board. With students from all income groups accessing free breakfast and lunches at school, there is no stigma and no stress from accumulating debt—just more kids who are well fed.

Children who are hungry can't focus on their schoolwork as well. That's why we have seen educational outcomes improve with universal school meals: kids who are well fed are better focused and better able to learn. That's good for the state both now and in the future, since an educated workforce is the bedrock of a strong economy.

There's another way that the Healthy School Meals Initiative will benefit Rhode Island's economy: increased support for local farmers and food businesses. School meals are purchased and produced at a volume that allows for farm-to-school partnerships and bulk procurement that benefits small farmers and businesses in our states. When families at the financial margins are struggling to feed their kids breakfast and lunch, they are likely to buy more processed foods from corporate sources and may skip meals altogether. Both these options are bad for children's health, and neither supports the Rhode Island food system in the way that school meals do.

Expanding access to school breakfast and lunch is sensible policy for all these reasons. Every kid deserves to eat healthy meals, so they can learn and grow as healthy, happy Rhode Islanders. It's good for them, it's good for our food system and it's good for our economy. Please support H5742, and ensure Healthy School Meals for All.

Thank you,

Charlotte Roberts

Professor of Sociology,
Providence College
Resident, RI House District 6