



April 29, 2025

House Committee on Finance
Rhode Island House of Representatives
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Submitted via electronic mail

Testimony in Support of House Bill 5742

Hon. Marvin Abney and Members of the Rhode Island House Committee on Finance,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony **in support of Bill (HB. 5742) AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION -- FEDERAL AID** which establishes a program to phase-in free breakfast and lunch meals in all public schools.

My name is Dawn Crayco, and I'm the Northeast Regional Policy Director with FoodCorps, submitting this letter along with my colleague Rebecca Kelley, the Rhode Island Impact & Partnerships Lead. Here at [FoodCorps](#), we believe that we grow better together. In communities throughout the country, FoodCorps partners with schools and communities to nourish kids' health, education, and sense of well-being. Across the state for the '24-'25 school year, FoodCorps has members based with Providence Public School District where they support nourishing school meals, provide food and nutrition education aligning with academic priorities, and help create community through food.

FoodCorps would like to offer our support for HB. 5742, introduced and supported by Representatives Caldwell, Stewart, Potter, Cotter, Carson, Donovan, Edwards, Diaz, O'Brien, and Shanley. This crucial legislation, when passed, would establish a Healthy School Meals for All program in Rhode Island public schools phased in over 3 years, starting with elementary schools, followed by middle schools and high schools. Healthy School Meals for All means offering breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost, regardless of household income, so they can learn and thrive. This bill would support what we already know to be true – that school food is an essential school supply.

Expansion of access to free school meals can provide certainty and funding for school nutrition professionals to deliver nourishing meals and work toward increases in school lunch participation. Increased funding and student participation allows school nutrition departments to improve their programs by higher quality food items and offer more choices. For example, in Providence, where students are able to eat free of charge through the federal Community Eligibility Provision, students are engaged in menu development through taste test, student

surveys, and food recycling and recovering efforts to decrease food waste.

We already know that school meals are a critical tool in combating adverse health outcomes and participation in school lunch is linked to achieving important school milestones, like increased attendance, better academic outcomes, higher standardized test scores, and stronger cognitive function.

As you deliberate on HB 5742, it is crucial to recognize the importance of supporting students to develop healthy eating habits at a young age. Access to nourishing food is a foundation for every child's ability to learn. This proactive approach sets kids up for greater success—at school and throughout their lives. By investing in nutritious school meals, fortified by farm to school efforts with Rhode Island agricultural products through [Rhode Island Farm to School efforts](#), we are laying the foundation for a healthier and more resilient future for the Ocean State's next generation.

When families are unable to pay for school meals, schools are forced to either collect that debt or take it on, putting a greater strain on families, administrators, and school budgets. For any number of reasons, whether it's due to a language barrier, incomplete paperwork, or misinformation about how to sign up, there are many factors that could prevent parents and caregivers from registering their children to receive free meals at school. Over time, consequences of not having access to free meals can compound in harmful ways. We know this policy is achieving increased access for youth across the region with state School Meals for All laws passed in Massachusetts, Vermont, and Maine. In Massachusetts alone, over 100,000 more children in Massachusetts ate school lunch daily since the passing of Universal School Meals in 2023.

In conclusion, we urge the House Finance Committee to support (HB 5742) and ensure its passage. By doing so, you will be taking a step in the right direction for championing the health of our children, and laying the foundation for a stronger food system. Increasing access to school meals is a long-term investment in our children's health and the resilience of our student body.

Thank you for your consideration and we encourage you to support (HB 5742).

Respectfully Submitted,

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