



April 28, 2025

The Honorable Marvin L. Abney, Chair
House Finance Committee
Rhode Island Statehouse
Providence, 02903

**RE: Testimony in Support of House Bill 5742-- A N A C T RELATING TO EDUCATION -- FEDERAL
AID**

On behalf of United Way of Rhode Island, we are writing to express our strong support for **House Bill 5742**, recognizing that access to healthy, nutritious meals is foundational to academic success, educational equity, and long-term economic mobility. A core priority of our **Achieve United** initiative is ensuring that all Rhode Islanders, regardless of background, have equitable access to the resources and support systems—like universal school meals—that enable them to thrive from early childhood through post-secondary education. By removing barriers to basic needs such as food security, we create the conditions necessary for every child to reach their fullest potential and build pathways to lifelong success.

House Bill 5742 is a critical step in addressing educational disparities. It invests in universal school meals, helping to eliminate food insecurity during the school day, enhance student learning, and remove barriers that disproportionately impact low-income and multilingual learner students. Expanding access to free, healthy meals ensures a brighter future for Rhode Island's children and strengthens the long-term vitality of our communities and workforce.

Currently, **one in four Rhode Island children live in households experiencing food insecurity**, meaning they may not have consistent access to enough food to maintain healthy, active lives (Economic Progress Institute, 2024). Access to school meals is directly linked to improved academic outcomes, better attendance rates, and stronger physical and mental health.

House Bill 5742 addresses these disparities by phasing in **universal free meals across all K-12 public schools**—starting with elementary schools and expanding to all students by the 2027-2028 school

[Uniting our community and resources to build racial equity and opportunities for all Rhode Islanders.](#)

year. It ensures that no student is stigmatized or singled out because of their family's financial circumstances. According to **the 2024 RI Kids Count Factbook**, students experiencing food insecurity are more likely to have lower math and reading scores, and addressing basic nutritional needs is essential for closing persistent achievement gaps (RI Kids Count, 2024).

By maximizing federal reimbursements and implementing a statewide universal meals program, Rhode Island can draw down additional federal resources, reduce administrative burdens on districts, and create a more equitable, hunger-free learning environment for all children.

Investing in education is an investment in Rhode Island's future. **House Bill 5742** will help ensure that all students—especially those from communities historically underserved and under-resourced—have access to the nutrition they need to learn, grow, and succeed.

By advancing education policies that meet students' basic needs alongside academic supports, we can break cycles of poverty and create lasting pathways to opportunity for the next generation. We respectfully urge your support for this legislation to build a more just, healthy, and prosperous Rhode Island.

Sincerely,

Elijah McLean
Manager, Government Relations & Policy
United Way Rhode Island