

April 29, 2025

Dear Chairman Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee: My name is Jason Kashdan. I am a registered dietitian and the founder of Alimente, a Providence-based nutrition therapy practice. I am writing to express my support for HB5742 to fund Healthy School Meals for All (HSMFA) in the FY26 Budget.

Why does Rhode Island need Healthy School Meals for All legislation now?

The current school meals program fails to reach every child who faces food insufficiency. Vulnerable children are ineligible for school food assistance because their family doesn't meet federal income thresholds. They make too much money to qualify, but not enough to meet a "standard of need" budget (about \$100,000 for a family of four in RI) – and can still struggle to afford basic necessities like housing, healthcare and food.

As the cost of living continues to increase, some working parents are forced to seek additional income. The current system puts their children at risk of losing access to free or reduced-price school meals because of that additional income.

How do nutritious school meals make Rhode Island children healthier?

School meal programs improve food insecurity for children. Breakfasts and lunches served at school are more nutritious than meals obtained elsewhere and are critical intervention points to combat the growing childhood obesity epidemic.

Students in schools who received free meals through the Community Eligibility Provision saw a reduction in obesity prevalence, compared to students in schools that were eligible to provide free meals through the program, but did not participate.

How can Rhode Island secure additional funding to provide healthy school meals for all?

Schools that opt in to the national Community Eligibility Provision provide meals free of charge regardless of students' household income, making it the most equitable option. But today in Rhode Island, we are missing out on funds to operate a HSMFA program by not optimizing the way schools in our state participate.

Instead of judging eligibility on a school-by-school basis, local education authorities could apply as group of schools or as a whole district, so that more schools could receive federal funds and the state could spend less money. The state could rely on a larger federal reimbursement to cover the entire cost of all meals served students in Rhode Island.

Could an investment in free school meals save money in the long run?

Universal free school meals help improve attendance rates and can help avoid school budget shortfalls. Eating at school means families spend less money on groceries at home. A positive lunchroom experience free of stigma contributes to a better social experience overall, which means they are more likely to be engaged in school and show up.

Making school meals free to all students is a logical and long-overdue strategy. When President Harry Truman established the National School Lunch Program in 1946, he affirmed that "safeguarding the health of the well-being of the Nation's children," by supporting states' efforts to offer healthy meals was a measure of national security. Passing Healthy School Meals for All legislation will establish a much-needed, permanent funding system and guarantee equitable food access to children in Rhode Island.

Sincerely,

Jason Kashdan, MS, RD

Alimente