



April 29, 2025

The Honorable Marvin Abney, Chair
House Committee on Finance
Rhode Island House of Representatives
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

SUBJECT: Support for House Bill 5742

Dear Chair Abney and Members of the Committee:

We respectfully request that you support and fund House Bill 5742, AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION -- FEDERAL AID, by Rep. Caldwell. This important proposal 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.

Healthy School Meals for All is an important step toward increasing equity in our schools, investing in education, and streamlining school nutrition programs. It is also one of the most impactful and holistic actions we can take to address hunger in Rhode Island. As we strive to improve academic performance and achieve Massachusetts' educational outcomes, we must follow our neighbor's lead and ensure Rhode Island children are fed for success.

The pandemic taught us many important lessons – and with school meals, we learned there is a better way to provide vital nutrition to our children. During the pandemic (March 2020 – June 2022), the USDA provided funding for schools to offer meals free of charge to all students. This effectively served as a successful trial run of a Healthy School Meals for All policy. Regrettably, the federal pandemic waivers expired prior to the start of the 22-23 school year and school meal programs are once again operating under a tiered payment system depending on family income eligibility.

It is time for Rhode Island to lead and ensure our children are hunger-free and ready to learn. Eight states have already made Healthy School Meals for All permanent including: Maine, California, Minnesota, Colorado, New Mexico, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Vermont. **We thank the General Assembly for taking steps last year to make reduced-price school meals free, helping children and families most in need – but much work remains. Sadly, there are students in every community in our state in need of a nutritious breakfast and lunch at school who do not qualify for free or reduced-price school meals.** Data from the RI Community Food Bank's *2024 Status Report on Hunger* found nearly two of every five households in Rhode Island have difficulty affording adequate food and are food insecure, a higher rate than at any time during the pandemic.ⁱ

Children and teens cannot learn on an empty stomach. High food prices continue to take a toll on both low-income and moderate-income families in our state. This crisis has health, educational, and economic consequences, leaving children particularly vulnerable to the long-term impact. Food insecurity can lead to a variety of negative health conditions, including diet-related diseases, and has severe consequences on a child's future health. School meals are an important source of nutrition and are a safeguard against chronic food insecurity. Healthy School Meals for All will benefit thousands of students each day and be a major step forward in eliminating health and education inequities.

The current policy for school meals, whereby some children are expected to pay while others receive their meals for free, creates stigma and shame for students that rely on school meals for their basic needs, and serves as an inequitable barrier for students who are not eligible but are still experiencing food insecurity. The current system is antiquated and broken. Rhode Island's education and school nutrition professionals are committed to their mission of keeping kids fed, healthy, and ready to learn, but we must support and invest in our schools to do better for our children.

School meals are an integral part of the school day and a contributor to student success, and should be no different than textbooks, technology, transportation, access to school nurses, and other services provided to all students in public schools without cost. Universal school meals incentivize greater participation in the school meals program and allow schools to better invest in equipment, staff training, and initiatives such as farm-to-school that focus on scratch cooking.



BENEFITS OF OFFERING HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL

- Reduces the prevalence of child hunger and food insecurity.
- Ensures all students are well-nourished and ready to learn.
- Supports student well-being.
- Improves learning outcomes.
- Improves attendance rates.
- Reduces stigma associated with eating school meals.
- Ends the problem of unpaid school meal debt.
- Eases administrative burden for schools.
- Supports school nutrition finances and operations.

Please support and fund House Bill 5742 to ensure all Rhode Island students can thrive and succeed. We believe our children and our schools are worth it – and Rhode Islanders do too. According to the Rhode Island Survey Initiative led by the University of Rhode Island's Harrington School for Communication and Media; the Social Science Institute for Research, Education, and Policy; and the Department of Political Science; **68% approve** of legislation that requires free lunches to be provided for all K-12 students attending public schools.ⁱⁱ The budget needed to support this initiative could be minimized if the state required that school districts maximize access to federal funds by participating in the Community Eligibility Provision, known as CEP, or other federal options.

We would be happy to provide additional information. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

The Rhode Island Healthy School Meals for All Coalition

American Academy of Pediatrics – RI Chapter
American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network
American College of Cardiology – RI Chapter
American Heart Association
Aquidneck Community Table
Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island
Care Transformation Collaborative Rhode Island
Central Congregational Church
City of Providence – Department of Housing & Human Services
East Bay Community Action Program
East Providence Health Equity Zone
Economic Progress Institute
Farm Fresh Rhode Island
FoodCorps
Hope & Main
League of Women Voters of Newport County
National Education Association Rhode Island
Oasis International
Open Door Health
Parents Leading for Educational Equity RI
Progreso Latino
Protect Our Healthcare RI
Rhode Island Academy of Nutrition & Dietetics
Rhode Island AFL-CIO
Rhode Island Alliance of YMCAs
Rhode Island Association of School Business Officials
Rhode Island Association of School Principals
Rhode Island Certified School Nurse Association
Rhode Island Coalition for Children and Families
Rhode Island Community Food Bank
Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals
Rhode Island Food Policy Council
Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition
Rhode Island Kids Count
Rhode Island Medical Society
Rhode Island PTA
Rhode Island Public Health Institute
Rhode Island School Superintendents' Association
Rhode Island State Nurses Association
Rhode Island Student Assistance Services
The Womxn Project
United Way of Rhode Island
Washington County Coalition for Children
West Warwick Health Equity Zone
Woonsocket Health Equity Zone
Young Voices

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ⁱ *2024 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island*, Rhode Island Community Food Bank, 2024. https://rifooodbank.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/2024-Status-Report_Web.pdf

ⁱⁱ *Rhode Island Survey Initiative*, University of Rhode Island Harrington School for Communication and Media; Social Science Institute for Research, Education, and Policy; and Department of Political Science, 2023. https://web.uri.edu/harrington/wp-content/uploads/sites/2164/RI-Survey_Results_2023-1.pdf