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Testimony Re: House Bill 5742 - Healthy School Meals for All
House Finance Committee
April 29, 2025
Stephanie Geller, Deputy Director

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is part of the **Healthy School Meals for All Coalition**, and today we would like to voice our support for House Bill 5742, which would **establish a Healthy School Meals for All program in Rhode Island public schools phased in over three years**, starting with elementary schools, followed by middle schools and high schools. I'd like to thank Representative Caldwell for sponsoring this bill and Representatives Stewart, Potter, Cotter, Carson, Donovan, Edwards, Diaz, O'Brien, and Shanley for co-sponsoring.

We would also like to thank the General Assembly for including a provision to help more children access free school meals in the FY 2025 budget. That budget included \$813,000 to provide free breakfast and lunch to the 6,500 students who were previously receiving reduced-price school meals. This expansion was a good start, and phasing in a Healthy School Meals for All program over the next three years would allow us to build on this momentum.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the USDA provided funding for schools to offer meals free of charge to all students. When this funding ended in June 2022, schools went back to collecting school meal applications and incurring and trying to collect school meal debt from families who struggled to make ends meet. This system creates stress and work for families and schools.

Since the pandemic ended, eight states have made Healthy School Meals for All permanent. These states include our neighbors in Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont and farther afield, California, Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, and New Mexico.

Why are so many states providing Healthy School Meals for All – because it simply makes sense for our kids, our schools, and our state.

Children cannot learn on an empty stomach. According to the RI Life Index, a survey conducted by Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and Brown University, more than one-third (38%) of Rhode Island households with children are food insecure. Children who are hungry are more likely to have behavior, emotional, and academic problems and are more likely to be tardy or absent from school, be suspended, and repeat a grade.

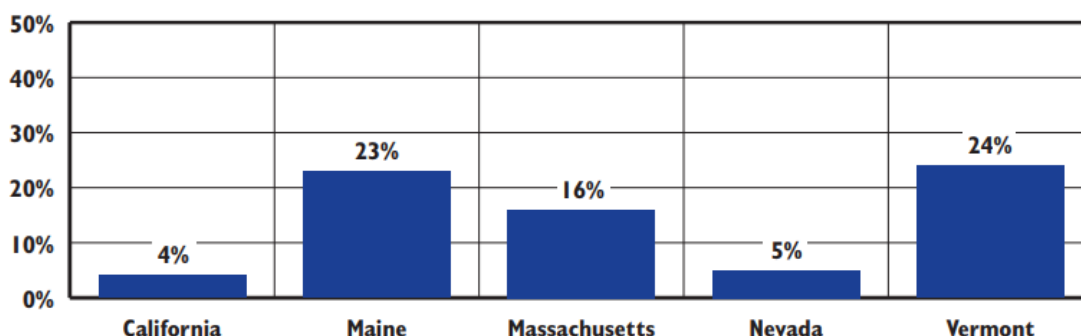
Providing free school meals to all students will reduce stigma and improve equity. Providing free meals to all students increases school meal participation by removing the stigma often associated with school meals.

Providing free school meals to all students would reduce administrative costs. Schools spend a tremendous amount of time and effort collecting and processing school meal applications and collecting unpaid school meal debt. This bill would ease the administrative burden for schools and end the problem of unpaid school meal debt.

This bill includes provisions that will maximize federal funds available to support school meal programs and encourage models like breakfast in the classroom and grab-and-go breakfasts that allow more children to participate.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT has been encouraging schools to adopt policies and practices that improve school breakfast participation for a long time, including breakfast in the classroom, breakfast after the bell, universal school breakfast, and the Community Eligibility Provision. We have been focused on this issue because we know that access to healthy school meals supports academic success and improves attendance, behavior, and health, including reducing obesity rates.


**Percentage Change in Children Participating in School Lunch in
Healthy School Meals for All States, 2018-2019 to 2022-2023 School Year**



Next week, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT will be releasing the *2025 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook*, and I encourage you to review our indicator on *Children Participating in School Meals*, which includes additional data and information this Committee might find helpful as you deliberate.

We urge this committee to pass this bill so all children in Rhode Island have access to the nutritious school meals they need to learn and thrive. Healthy School Meals for All is a key ingredient our state needs to improve educational outcomes. This is an investment that Rhode Islanders overwhelmingly support and that is needed to fight hunger and ensure that children are ready to learn. We think our children and our schools are worth it.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.