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Testimony on H-7793, Healthy School Meals for All House Finance Committee April 28, 2026

Good afternoon members of the House Finance Committee. My name is **Jocelyn Antonio**. I am a resident of Cumberland, Rhode Island. I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity as a public health professional

I strongly urge your favorable consideration and support for House Bill 7793 – An Act Relating to Education – Federal Aid, sponsored by Representative Caldwell and co-sponsored by Representatives McEntee, Batista, Potter, Spears, Casimiro, Kazarian, Boylan, Kislak, and Speakman.

This legislation would establish a universal school breakfast and lunch program in Rhode Island public schools, phased in over three years, starting with elementary schools in the 2027-2028 school year. This program is not just about food, it's about investing in the future of Rhode Island's children, promoting health equity, and supporting the economic well-being of our state.

Addressing Food Insecurity and Promoting Health Equity

The pandemic exposed the stark reality of food insecurity for many families in our country - including right here in Rhode Island. According to the Rhode Island Community Food Bank's 2025 Status Report on Hunger, 34% of households are food insecure, with rates as high as almost 60% in communities of color [1].

Current eligibility guidelines for free or reduced-price meals exclude many working families. For instance, a family of four must earn below \$40,560 to qualify for free school meals, yet the Economic Progress Institute's 2024 RI Standard of Need estimates that such a family would need at least \$107,126 annually to meet basic expenses [2], [3]. Those outdated thresholds do not reflect Rhode Island's economic reality.

Enhancing Child Health and Academic Performance

Universal school meals are proven to improve academic performance and attendance, enhance student health, and attendance while reducing behavioral issues. By providing all students access to free, universal school meals, regardless of income, we can reduce health disparities and foster better learning environments for all children.

Reducing Stigma and Administrative Burdens

Universal school meal programs boost student participation in school meals, eliminate the stigma often associated with receiving free or reduced-price meals. No child should feel shame for needing food. Furthermore, these programs ease administrative burdens on schools by eliminating the need for meal applications and payment tracking – freeing up time and resources to focus on education and student support.

Lessons from the Pandemic and Other State

Between school years 2020 and 2022, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) granted waivers that enable universal free school meals to all students.

When these waivers ended in the 2022-2023 school year, we immediately started seeing the negative impacts of reverting to a free and reduced school meals program. The Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) found an immediate 22% decrease in free school lunch participation [4], [5]. There was a 3% decrease in free school breakfast and lunch participation during the 2023-2024 compared to 2022-2023.

In contrast, states that adopted permanent universal meals – such as Minnesota, Colorado, and Michigan- experienced more than a 20% increase in participation during the same period [5]. These states demonstrate the success of the very policy Rhode Island is now considering.

Economic and Community Benefits

Implementing a universal meal program can have positive economic impacts. Increased participation in school meal programs can lead to higher federal reimbursements, offsetting state costs. Moreover, sourcing food locally, as encouraged by the bill, supports local agriculture and stimulates the state economy. Conversely, low participation in the school meals programs results in missed funding opportunities and reduced economic efficiency [5].

Conclusion

My three younger siblings and I were fortunate to receive free school meals from kindergarten through high school. In our schools, where over 80% of students qualified, receiving a free school meal was a shared experience rather than a source of shame. For my parents, it was one less burden to carry while they worked to provide for us.

I sit before you today as the direct result of that investment. House Bill 7793 is not just a line item in a budget; it is an investment in the health, dignity, and potential of every child in Rhode Island.

I respectfully urge your favorable consideration and passage of this vital bill; for the nourishment of the minds, bodies, and dreams of Rhode Island's children, both now and for generations to come.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Jocelyn Antonio, MPH

Reference:

- [1] Rhode Island Community Food Bank, "2025 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island," Providence, RI, 2026. Accessed: Mar. 10, 2026. [Online]. Available: https://rifoodbank.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/2025-Status-Report_Digital_FINAL-1.pdf
- [2] The Economic Progress Institute, "The 2024 Rhode Island Standard of Need," Economic Progress Institute, 2024. Accessed: Apr. 02, 2025. [Online]. Available: https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/RISN_2024_web_14.pdf
- [3] "Free/Reduced School Meals," The Economic Progress Institute. Accessed: Apr. 29, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://economicprogressri.org/resources/free-reduced-school-meals>
- [4] Food Research & Action Center, "The Reach of School Breakfast and Lunch During the 2022–2023 School Year," Mar. 2024. Accessed: Apr. 29, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Reach-Report-2024.pdf>
- [5] Food Research & Action Center, "The Reach of School Breakfast and Lunch During the 2023–2024 School Year," Apr. 2025. Accessed: Apr. 29, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Reach-Report-2025.pdf>