



May 19, 2026

The Honorable Louis DiPalma
Senate Committee on Finance
Rhode Island General Assembly
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

SUBJECT: Support for Senate Bill 2663

Dear Chair DiPalma and Members of the Committee:

We respectfully request that you support and fund S. 2663, AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION -- FEDERAL AID, by Senator Vargas. 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. We also want to recognize and thank Senator Acosta for introducing similar legislation (S. 2083).

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. Nine states have already made Healthy School Meals for All permanent including: Maine, California, Minnesota, Colorado, New Mexico, Massachusetts, Michigan, Vermont, and New York. We thank the General Assembly for taking steps during the 2024 session 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.** 40% of Rhode Island households with at least one child are food-insecure, according to *The RI Life Index*, a study conducted by Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and the Brown University School of Public Health.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 S. 2663 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 Cancer Society Cancer Action Network
American Heart Association
Farm Fresh RI
National Education Association Rhode Island
RI Certified School Nurse Association
RI Community Food Bank
RI Farm & Sea to School Network
RI Kids Count

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ⁱ *The RI Life Index* – Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island; Brown University School of Public Health, 2025. <https://rilifeindex.org/>

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