



Massachusetts
APPLESEED | Center for
Law & Justice

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September 11, 2019

Representative Andres X. Vargas, and
Senator Cynthia Stone Creem, Co-Chairs
Joint Committee on Education
State House, Room 473G
Boston, MA 02133

RE: Testimony in Support of H.585/S.256, *An Act to Promote Student Nutrition*

Dear Chairwoman Peisch, Chairman Lewis, and Honorable Members of the Committee:

Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law & Justice (“Massachusetts Appleseed”) respectfully submits the following testimony in support of H.585/S.256 *An Act to Promote Student Nutrition* and strongly urges the Joint Committee on Education issue a favorable report for both bills.

Massachusetts Appleseed’s mission is to promote equal rights and opportunities for Massachusetts residents by developing and advocating for systemic solutions to social justice issues. Appleseed centers across the country work both collectively and independently to build a society in which opportunities are genuine, access to the law is universal and equal, and government advances the public interest.

Central to this work is ensuring that schools are safe, inclusive places for children of all circumstances and backgrounds. In lunchrooms statewide, students are regularly humiliated and denied lunch as a result of their family's inability or failure to pay their lunch fees. This practice, known as “lunch shaming,” takes a physical, psychological, and educational toll on students. Both H.585 and S.256 would prevent these kinds of practices and would represent a critical step towards justice for Massachusetts' most vulnerable students.

In March of 2018, the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (“MLRI”) published a report summarizing the policies of 154 Massachusetts school districts, finding that 28 districts currently “lunch shame” students with unpaid lunch debt. According to the MLRI report (the “report”), most of these schools have “meal account caps,” whereby students who reach a limited amount of unpaid charges on their student account are punished by having their hot meal publicly replaced with an “alternate meal,” often consisting of a cold, cheese sandwich. This practice is not only wasteful, but it also brings attention to a student’s classmates that they have school meal debt. Some schools further punish these students by preventing them from participating in

extracurricular activities, and some districts did not have their meal policy posted anywhere, leaving parents and students with no notice of the consequences of unpaid lunch fees.¹

For many low-income students, being denied a full lunch can mean missing their primary meal of the day, resulting in serious consequences in student performance. A survey of K-8 school staff conducted in 2015 by the advocacy group School Nutrition Association found that 75% of teachers reported students coming to school hungry, with 59% of educators reporting that "a lot or most of their students [depended] on school meals a primary source of nutrition."² For low-income students, the test score increases associated with being provided a healthy lunch were 40% larger than for their peers.³ These findings demonstrate that lunch shaming is not only a harmful discipline practice, but it can also lead to worsened educational outcomes for students.

The legislation before the Committee would prohibit Massachusetts schools from publicly identifying students as being unable to pay their lunch fees and from punishing these students for meal debt. This restriction would include stopping staff from disposing of a meal which has already been served or providing students with an "alternate" meal. This bill would also prevent schools from speaking directly to children about their lunch debt or informing the Department of Children and Families of this debt. In addition to these protections, H.585/S.286 would both require school districts to reduce student meal debt by maximizing federal revenue under reduced-price or free lunch programs. Finally, the bill requires school districts with 40% or more low-income students to elect the "community eligibility provision" to provide universal free meals unless the school board votes to opt out, a practice that would render school lunch debt irrelevant in many low-income districts.

No child should be publicly humiliated and denied a healthy lunch due to their family's inability to pay their lunch fees. **Massachusetts Appleseed strongly urges you to issue a favorable report for H.585/S.286**, ensuring that no Massachusetts student leaves the school lunchroom hungry and humiliated. This bill represents a chance to not only ban one harmful practice but also to make our schools more inclusive, welcoming places in which students can learn and grow.

Thank you for considering this testimony and please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Respectfully submitted,



¹*Denying Food and Shaming Children: Unpaid School Meal Policies in Massachusetts*. Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, Mar. 2018, www.mlri.org/uploads/48/1f/481f9f9228712df0601b29be77ad90dc/MLRI-School-Meal-Debt-Report-March-2018.pdf

²Anderson, Melinda D. "What Do Unpaid Lunch Tabs Mean For Schools?" *The Atlantic*, 9 Feb 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/02/unpaid-school-lunch-bills/460509/>.

³Anderson, Michael L et al. "How the quality of school lunch affects students' academic performance." *Brookings*, 3 May 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2017/05/03/how-the-quality-of-school-lunch-affects-students-academic-performance/>.

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