



**Massachusetts
APPLESEED** | Center for
Law & Justice

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January 4, 2021

Alice H. Peisch, House Chair and
Jason M. Lewis, Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Education
Massachusetts State House
Room 511-B
Boston, MA 02133

RE: Testimony in Support of H.714/S.314, *An Act Relative to Universal School Meals*

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

Massachusetts Appleseed respectfully submits the following testimony in support of H.714/S.314, *An Act Relative to Universal School Meals* and requests that the Joint Committee on Education issue a favorable report of this bill.

The mission of the Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice (MA Appleseed) is to promote equal rights and opportunities for Massachusetts residents by developing and advocating for systemic solutions to social justice issues. Through in-depth research, community problem-solving, and consensus building we develop powerful solutions to pressing social justice challenges.

Central to this mission is ensuring that all children in Massachusetts, especially those from disadvantaged and historically marginalized communities, have access to opportunity and quality public education. An essential element of ensuring equity for all students is proper access to food, as hungry students experience stifled academic achievement. Because school meals can cover over 50% of a student's caloric intake every day, we cannot underestimate the power of a breakfast or lunch in providing a student with the fuel they need to stay focused in class.

Unfortunately, many students in Massachusetts often do not have access to the amount of food they need to be successful in school, as a significant population in the Commonwealth struggles with food insecurity.¹ In fact, according to Project Bread, the rate of food insecurity among families in Massachusetts has doubled since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, going from one in ten to

¹ "School Meals For All (SD519/HD1161)," Resources, Project Bread, accessed March 3, 2021.
<https://feedkidsma.org/uploads/attachments/ckkobtx4s01cok99hp1smdod5-pb-usm-aboutthebill.pdf>;

one in five, with Black and Latinx students disproportionately impacted.² In response, Massachusetts schools are currently offering free school meals to all students regardless of household income level.³ These changes, however, are temporary; without permanent policy change, our schools will revert to pre-pandemic free and reduced-price meal eligibility requirements, which fail to account for 27% of food-insecure children.⁴ Thus, reverting back to the pre-pandemic norm would mean failing many children across the Commonwealth, leaving them at risk of obesity, increased absences, and behavioral problems.⁵

Through *An Act Relative to Universal School Meals*, Massachusetts would require all schools to make school breakfast and lunch available to all students at no charge to the student or their family, thereby creating a more equitable school environment in which no student will go hungry.

To mitigate the costs of this new policy, the bill requires that eligible schools maximize the federal funds available to cover school meals by adopting the Community Eligibility provision, a USDA released national provision that allows high need schools to provide free meals to all its students. The Community Eligibility Provision shifts the burden of food assistance applications from parents to districts. Districts are considered eligible if at least 40% of their student body consists of ‘identified students’ (e.g., children certified through SNAP).⁶ Any costs that are not covered through the Community Eligibility provision would be covered by the state via the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Furthermore, the bill requires that DESE consult with the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) to create ways for Massachusetts schools to promote SNAP outreach through referrals to outreach partners or application assistance. With such increased outreach efforts, the Commonwealth can maximize federal reimbursement.

Free school meals are not just important in the battle against hunger in Massachusetts, but also in removing the stigma associated with applying for benefits or paying off school meal debt, and to protect students from income-based discrimination. In a joint report, Project Bread and Children’s HealthWatch found that 31% of food insecure participants in an East Boston Neighborhood Health Center survey experienced food-related discrimination commonly in public and when applying for assistance programs.⁷

² “Hunger by the Numbers,” Stats & Research, Project Bread, accessed January 20, 2021.

<https://www.projectbread.org/hunger-by-the-numbers>.

³ Rhondella Richardson, “Free School Meals Program Extended through End of June,” WCVB, October 15, 2020.

<https://www.nycfoodpolicy.org/food-policy-snapshot-free-school-meals-extended-through-2022/>

⁴ “Ending Student Hunger is On the Table,” Resources, Project Bread, accessed March 3, 2021.

<https://feedkidsma.org/uploads/attachments/ckkobsais01col19hkwwybhrz-pb-usm-one-pager-general-public.pdf>.

⁵ “Ending Student Hunger is On the Table,” Resources, Project Bread, accessed March 3, 2021.

<https://feedkidsma.org/uploads/attachments/ckkobsais01col19hkwwybhrz-pb-usm-one-pager-general-public.pdf>.

⁶ “Community Eligibility Provision Eligibility Requirements and Benefits,” Office for Food and Nutrition Programs, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, last updated September 21, 2020.

<https://www.doe.mass.edu/cnp/nprograms/nslp/cep-eligibility.html>.

⁷ Ana Poblacion et al, *The State of Hunger in Massachusetts: Massachusetts Trends & East Boston Community Snapshot*, 16.

The punitive practices and stigmas surrounding free and reduced-price meal participation do not only unfairly shame students for their socioeconomic backgrounds, they hinder students' ability to succeed in the classroom. Though passage of this bill, Massachusetts public schools would see a participation increase of more than 50,000 students in school meal programs, significantly reducing the number of hungry children.⁸

An Act Relative to Universal School Meals is necessary to end hunger in Massachusetts. Massachusetts Appleseed strongly urges you to issue a favorable report for H.714/S.314, so that every student is given an equal chance to succeed, and none are shamed or punished for factors that are not within their control.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Deborah M. Silva".

Deborah M. Silva,
Executive Director
Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law & Justice

⁸ "Ending Student Hunger is On the Table," Resources, Project Bread, accessed March 3, 2021.
<https://feedkidsma.org/uploads/attachments/ckkobsais01col19hkwwybhrz-pb-usm-one-pager-general-public.pdf>.