



Representative Denise C. Garlick and  
Senator Jason M. Lewis, Co-Chairs  
Joint Committee on Education  
State House, Room 473G  
Boston, MA 02133

**RE: H.603/S.261 *An Act to Relative to Universal School Meals***

Dear Chairwoman Garlick, 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.603/S.261 *An Act Relative to Universal School Meals*, and it strongly urges the Joint Committee on Education to issue a favorable report to both of these 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. Massachusetts Appleseed is part of a non-profit network of 18 public interest justice centers in the United States and Mexico. The centers 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. Access to school meals for everyone ensures that students are in the best position to learn, providing equitable opportunities within education.

After three years in which free school meals have been available to all Massachusetts students, our state is set to terminate free universal school meals. We are set to return to the pre-pandemic federal school meals programs, and the administrative burdens and stigma that prevent families from accessing the nutritious meals their students need. If this happens, it will increase the already high levels of childhood food insecurity in our state, add to economic and racial inequality, and harm our students and families.

H.603/S.261 would directly address the impediments that prevent children from accessing school meals, ensure that school meals are available to all public-school students, and effectively maximize federal dollars to support family nutrition. Specifically, H.603/S.261 would do the following:

- 1) require Massachusetts schools to adopt universal school meals under USDA guidelines;
- 2) provide for the state of Massachusetts to cover the costs of this program that are not covered by the federal government, and

- 3) require schools to support SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) outreach efforts.

We urge your support for this important and effective legislation.

## **The Crucial Need for School Meals**

Approximately one in five families in Massachusetts currently experiences food insecurity, meaning the family lacks reliable access to sufficient nutritious, affordable meals. Rates of food insecurity increased dramatically at the outset of the COVID pandemic, and they have remained high as inflation and high food prices have affected Massachusetts families.<sup>1</sup>

Childhood food insecurity is particularly acute. A recent statewide study found that in one in three Massachusetts households a child was hungry, skipped a meal, or did not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food.<sup>2</sup> Black and Hispanic families, LGBTQ+ families, and families in rural western Massachusetts, are disproportionately impacted and face especially high levels of childhood food insecurity.<sup>3</sup>

School meals play a vital role in meeting children's nutritional needs. School meals may account for nearly half of a child's daily calories.<sup>4</sup> School meals are typically more nutritious than meals outside of school, and increase children's consumption of fruits and vegetables. A recent Tufts University study found that school meals exceeded all other sources of meals in their nutritional value.<sup>5</sup> Access to these high-quality school meals can play an important role in modelling good nutrition, and in preventing lifetime food-related illnesses like diabetes, obesity, and heart disease.

Prior to the COVID pandemic, subsidized or free school breakfasts and lunches were made available to Massachusetts students on a sliding scale of eligibility based primarily on family income. Some school districts with particularly high rates of child poverty were eligible to enroll as a district in the federal school meals program. But in most districts, it was the responsibility

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<sup>1</sup> <https://projectbread.org/hunger-by-the-numbers> (citing data from the U.S. Household Pulse Survey).

<sup>2</sup> "Opportunities to Improve Food Equity and Access in Massachusetts: Ending Hunger – Together," Greater Boston Food Bank in collaboration with Mass General Brigham, 2023, [https://www.gbfb.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Ending-Hunger-Together\\_Opportunities-to-Improve-Food-Equity-and-Access.pdf](https://www.gbfb.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Ending-Hunger-Together_Opportunities-to-Improve-Food-Equity-and-Access.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> "Opportunities to Improve Food Equity and Access in Massachusetts: Ending Hunger – Together," Greater Boston Food Bank in collaboration with Mass General Brigham, 2023, [https://www.gbfb.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Ending-Hunger-Together\\_Opportunities-to-Improve-Food-Equity-and-Access.pdf](https://www.gbfb.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Ending-Hunger-Together_Opportunities-to-Improve-Food-Equity-and-Access.pdf); <https://projectbread.org/hunger-by-the-numbers> (citing data from the U.S. Household Pulse Survey)

<sup>4</sup> "Nutrition Standards in Schools," American Federation of Teachers, <https://www.aft.org/childrens-health/nutrition#:~:text=School%20meals%20are%20a%20key%20ingredient%20for%20school%20success.&text=%5B1%5D%20School%20lunches%20and%20breakfast,and%20nutritious%20meals%20every%20day.>

<sup>5</sup> "Study Finds Americans Eat Food of Mostly Poor Nutritional Quality – Except at School," Tufts Now, April 12, 2021, <https://now.tufts.edu/2021/04/12/study-finds-americans-eat-food-mostly-poor-nutritional-quality-except-school#:~:text=Study%20Finds%20Americans%20Eat%20Food%20of%20Mostly%20Poor%20Nutritional%20Quality%20%E2%80%93%20Except%20at%20School>

of individual families to determine their own eligibility and submit the necessary paperwork to apply for free or reduced-price meals for their children.

Many more families were likely excluded from the program due to administrative and psychological barriers. Families may not be aware of the reduced cost meal programs, or may not successfully determine their eligibility and complete paperwork. Families may fall outside of the eligibility criteria, yet experience a short-term crisis, such as a temporary job loss or medical demand, that results in lost meals. Families may not want to expose their own economic fragility by applying for subsidized school meals. Immigrant families may fear that an application will put them at risk of deportation or otherwise impact their immigration status. Children may not want to expose themselves to the stigma of receiving free or subsidized meals.

These pre-pandemic eligibility standards excluded many children who were in need. In 2019, nearly a quarter of the 121,560 Massachusetts children who faced food insecurity did not meet the eligibility criteria for free or reduced-price school meals.<sup>6</sup> Children of color were especially impacted; for example, national data shows that students of color accounted for nearly 60 percent of children just above the eligibility criteria, who struggled with food insecurity but did not qualify for free school meals.<sup>7</sup>

### **Universal School Meals Benefit Students, Promote Equity, and Benefit Families**

A universal school meals approach removes these barriers and ensures that *every* student can receive nutritious school meals, without cost or stigma. Families do not need to apply, and schools do not need to collect payment, verify eligibility, or distinguish between families. School can simply offer meals to every hungry student, in the same way that they offer other school services to every student.

We know that universal school meals work. When the federal government implemented waivers to eliminate the cost of school meals in response to the COVID pandemic, rates of participation increased dramatically. By March 2022, more than 50,000 additional Massachusetts students were receiving school lunches, as compared to the prior year, an increase of 42.3%.<sup>8</sup> Multiple studies have shown that the increased participation in school meals is correlated with improved attendance, improved nutrition, and improved grades.<sup>9</sup> Students and school districts also benefit

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.projectbread.org/blog/now-is-the-time-for-massachusetts-to-make-school-meals-for-all-permanent>

<sup>7</sup> "School Nutrition & Racial Equality, Legal Defense Fund (citing 2002 Census data), <https://www.naacpldf.org/case-issue/school-nutrition-racial-equity-the-need-for-universal-healthy-school-meals/#:~:text=Expanding%20access%20to%20free%20school,achievement%20and%20reducing%20student%20suptions>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.projectbread.org/blog/massachusetts-becomes-5th-state-to-guarantee-students-access-to-free-school-meals-in-2022-2023>

<sup>9</sup> "Universal School Meals," Center for Science in the Public Interest, <https://cspinet.org/universal-school-meals#:~:text=The%20benefits%20of%20universal%20meals%20are%20widespread&text=Data%20from%20the%20Community%20Eligibility,increased%20participation%20in%20school%20lunch>; Cohen, J, *et al.* Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food

from the simplicity of the universal school meal approach, which eliminates the need for students to stand in line to pay, and eliminates the need for school districts to collect and process payments and distinguish between categories of students.

Universal school meals are also important in advancing equity. Allowing all students to receive the same access to healthy meals eliminates damaging stigma from children receiving free or reduced meals, or skipping school meals because they lack funds to pay. Children report that when all students have the same access to meals, they feel less fear of bullying or fighting.<sup>10</sup>

And universal school meals benefit Massachusetts families. Families can be reassured that their children will have a steady source of nutritious meals, without losing meals during periods of family crisis or need. School meals can save families up to \$1,200 per student per year, directly impacting family budgets.<sup>11</sup>

The universal school meals program was so effective and popular that Massachusetts chose to extend the program by one year, through the School Meals for All program, after federal waivers ended in 2022. Momentum is building across the country to make such programs permanent, with seven states now committed to permanent free school meals for all, and others working to pass such legislation.<sup>12</sup>

## **H.603/S.261**

Today students in Massachusetts are at imminent risk of losing access to universal school meals. Families who have depended for the past three years on free school meals will feel a hit to their budgets at a time when food prices are rising, and food insecurity remains stubbornly high. Students, who are still recovering from pandemic learning losses, will be at risk of losing the nutritious food they need in order to learn.

H.603/S.261 would ensure that all Massachusetts students have access to school meals. The legislation will provide for Massachusetts schools to adopt universal school meals under USDA guidelines and will provide for the state of Massachusetts to cover the costs of this program that are not covered by the federal government. The legislation will also maximize federal assistance to Massachusetts families by requiring schools to support SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) outreach efforts.

We urge you to support this important legislation.

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Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review. *Nutrients*, Mar. 11, 2021, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8000006/>

<sup>10</sup> Gutierrez, E., "The Effect of Universal Free Meals on Student Perceptions of School Climate: Evidence from New York City," June 2021, EdWorkingPaper: 21-430, Annenberg Institute at Brown University, <https://www.edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai21-430.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.projectbread.org/blog/now-is-the-time-for-massachusetts-to-make-school-meals-for-all-permanent>

<sup>12</sup> "2023 Large School District Report," Food Research & Action Center, <https://frac.org/large-school-district-report-2023>; <https://feedkidsma.org/news-updates/michigan-becomes-the-7th-state-to-pass-legislation-to-make-free-school-meals-for-all-permanent>

Respectfully submitted,



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