

BILL: Senate Bill 579
TITLE: Primary and Secondary Education – Breakfast and Lunch Programs – Universal Expansion Report
POSITION: SUPPORT
DATE: March 27, 2024
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means
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The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) supports legislation and funding to ensure state reimbursement of local school system costs to provide universal access to school breakfasts and lunches for all students. In the absence of legislative action and requisite increase in state funding necessary to achieve free universal school meals, MABE supports the study called for in Senate Bill 579, as amended.

MABE recognizes the importance of developing healthy school environments, which includes providing high quality health and physical education programs as well as meeting the nutritional needs of students through school breakfasts, lunches, and afterschool meals. Thousands of children from low-income households in Maryland depend on school meals for the nutrition they need to learn and grow. Unfortunately, for too long too many children and families have not taken advantage of school meal programs for reasons ranging from the cumbersome paperwork requirements to the stigma associated with participating. Enacting and funding universal access to nutritious school breakfasts and lunches would contribute greatly to the overall health and well-being of our students by eliminating such barriers.

Early in the pandemic, Congress gave the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) the authority to issue child nutrition waivers so that schools systems could adapt their meal programs to provide meals to students even as buildings were closed. These child nutrition waivers were to expire on June 30, 2022 which would have resulted in discontinuing breakfast, lunch and afterschool meal options for millions of students. MABE joined other state and national organizations in urging Congress to extend the child nutrition waivers so that school systems could continue to receive the federal reimbursements for the meals they serve. The Keep Kids Fed Act was enacted to extend partial school meal flexibilities in the 2022-2023 school year. However, today, in the absence of federal action, Maryland must lead by investing additional state funding to ensure the continued availability of universal access to school breakfasts and lunches for all students across the state.

Federal and state standards for school nutrition continue to be reformed and enhanced to address the national epidemics of juvenile diabetes and obesity. At the same time, child hunger and inequitable access to healthy meals impacts far too many students as an obstacle to learning. Therefore, MABE also supports federal legislation and actions by the federal government to improve and increase funding for expanded access to high quality school meal programs.

For these reasons, MABE requests a favorable report on Senate Bill 579.