

AN ACT TO PROMOTE SCHOOL NUTRITION (S.298/H.715)

Sponsored by Senator Cynthia Creem and Representatives Andy Vargas & Sean Garballey



When kids are hungry at school, they cannot learn. Hungry kids cannot concentrate, have lower academic achievement, suffer cognitive and development impairments, exhibit more behavioral problems, have more absences, visit the nurse more often, and are at higher risk of obesity.

Food insecurity is a crisis with health, educational, and economic consequences, leaving children particularly vulnerable to the long-term impact. Rates of food insecurity among children in Massachusetts were already too high in our state prior to the COVID-19 pandemic at 1 in 10. Now more than 1 in 5 households with children report difficulty affording enough to eat, with Black and Latino families disproportionately impacted.

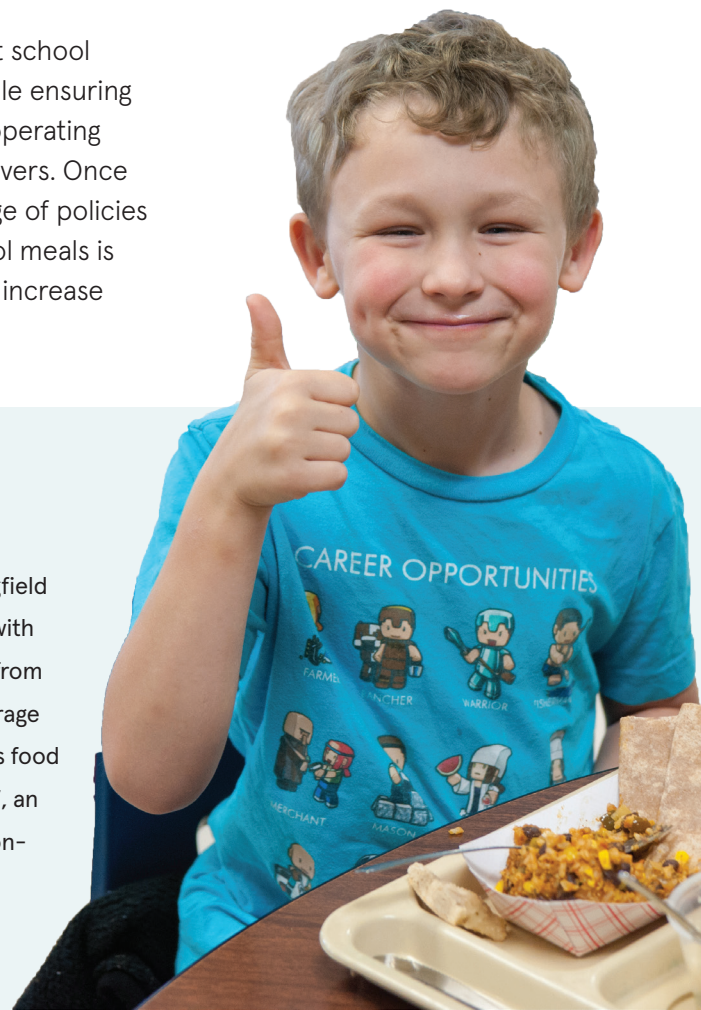
The problem

Before COVID, school meal debt was a significant challenge for most school districts struggling to ensure students are fed and ready to learn while ensuring the costs of food and labor are covered. Currently school districts operating in person are able to offer 100% free meals due to federal USDA waivers. Once these federal options end, school districts may revert back to a range of policies to limit school meal debt. Ultimately, expanding access to free school meals is the most effective way to reduce debt, boost student nutrition, and increase federal dollars coming into the Commonwealth.

Expanding access to student nutrition is a necessary step toward ending hunger in our state and ensuring all our children can thrive.

Springfield Public Schools

After Springfield implemented the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), Springfield saw its average daily participation (ADP) for lunch increase to 75%. Combined with breakfast after the bell, Springfield achieved rapid growth in its breakfast ADP from 44% in 2014 to 64 % in 2016. These rates compared favorably with national average ADP of 59.1% for lunch and 30.2% for breakfast. The Springfield Public Schools food program revenue grew steadily from \$15.4 million in 2014 to \$22.1 million in 2017, an increase of 43.5%. Springfield has been able to create school gardens and an on-site culinary center to prepare meals in-house for students.



What will the bill accomplish?

The bill gets Massachusetts back on the road to recovery by taking four key steps to boost revenue and reduce unpaid meal debt, especially as schools “return to normal” after COVID with in-person instruction:

✘ **Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)**

The bill requires schools and school districts with a high number of low income “directly certified” students to implement the universal free school meal options unless the district is able to justify to the state that doing so would create a financial burden. Given the 25% increase in SNAP participation since March 2020 due to COVID, even more schools and school districts may qualify for this important federal option.

And all students in newly approved CEP districts will qualify for federal Emergency Broadband Benefits (EBB) for as long as this special program lasts.

✘ **Eliminate reduced-price school meal co-pays**

The bill allows school districts to offer families with income between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty level free meals by having the state cover the \$0.40 fee for lunch and \$0.30 fee for breakfast. This can represent up to \$126 per student per year for a family. Other states eliminated the reduced-price co-pay for students for breakfast and/or lunch – including CO, ME, MN, ND, OH, OR, VT and WA. Research shows that eliminating co-pays boosts overall meal participation and reduces meal debt. Congressional delegation.

✘ **Maximize federal NSLP reimbursement & not involve students in meal debt**

This bill requires school districts to reduce meal debt by robustly checking data-bases for free meal eligibility; promoting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits that trigger automatic free meal status for a family; directly communicating with adults about meal debt; and limiting the steps a district might take against students who may have debt.

Wareham Public Schools

All six schools in the Wareham district were grouped together to have an overall identified student population of 47.5%. Even with this free reimbursement rate on the lower end of the spectrum, the district has been able to serve free breakfast and lunch to every student. The district has seen many benefits after implementing CEP. New menu items are now possibilities because of the additional staff time available for preparation. The response from the community has been fantastic. The School Nutrition Director explains that, in her time at Wareham, she “has not heard one negative thing” in reference to the provision and it creates a more welcoming environment around meals at the school.

Salem Public Schools

Salem students have been eating for free since CEP became available across Massachusetts in 2014. The district enrolled four schools in CEP in the first year, quickly expanded to ten, and now covers every school in the district. With approximately 94% of their meals reimbursed through CEP, the district saw a large increase in funds available, which could be reinvested in the program. In recent years, Salem has purchased a new refrigerator truck to transfer fruits and vegetables to the different schools in the district, increasing the amount of organic produce served in all of their meals. The district has seen a significant participation increase after enrolling in CEP (15-20%). Visits to the nurse for hunger issues decreased. By running the direct certification update three times each month, Salem is catching as many newly eligible students as possible and boosting their reimbursement rate. (Source: Project Bread CNOP Program)

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