

Statement of Jonathan Stein for Children First PA
before the
PA House Children & Youth and Education Committees
March 30, 2023

Ending Hunger in Pennsylvania's Schools

Good morning, I am Jonathan Stein speaking for Children First PA and first want to thank each of the Representatives here from the Children & Youth and Education Committees for this hearing which we hope will be a major step toward ending hunger among children in Pennsylvania's schools. Children First PA (formerly Public Citizens for Children & Youth) works to improve the lives of our children in southeastern PA by developing initiatives and advocating for quality health care, child care, public education and family stability.

I have been for over 50 years a legal aid attorney, including in roles as Executive Director and General Counsel at Community Legal Services in Philadelphia, now retired. Over the past 35 years I worked to expand access to school meals under the federal School Lunch and Breakfast programs, and successfully advocated for and got adopted the nation's first universal-type school meals program at the Philadelphia School District. This model was embraced by the U.S. Congress in 2010 which codified a version of it as the Community Eligibility Provision ("CEP") to provide for a universal free school meals for high poverty school districts and schools (ones comprising at least 40% of low-income student populations).

CEP has resulted in greatly expanded participation in free lunches and breakfasts with 16.2 million children attending CEP schools in 2021-22.¹ We should all take pride that already over 1000 schools educating 533,000 students in the Commonwealth are now using this model to make sure the largest possible number of students are given free access to school meals every day².

But more must be done to make sure every child has the benefit of school meals. I am especially pleased to see that this torch for expanded free meals participation is being carried by those of you today who are considering further measures to effectively end hunger in Pennsylvania classrooms and enable students to reach their full potential in school achievement and to lead healthy lives into adulthood.

Adopting Universal Free School Meals in Pennsylvania

We applaud Gov. Josh Shapiro’s budget proposal for \$38.5 million to continue Gov. Wolf’s initiative for universal free breakfasts into the 2023-24 school year.³ But, we can and should do better than insure only that children will not go hungry for the first half of the school day. To end hunger for the entire school day the General Assembly should pass Rep. Emily Kinkead’s and Sen. Lindsey Williams’s, “No Student Should Go Hungry Universal School Meals” legislation.

¹ About 33,000 schools and 5,500 school districts nationally participated in Community Eligibility in the 2021-22 school year. And 74.3% of eligible schools adopted Community Eligibility. See <https://frac.org/community-eligibility>. Community Eligibility doesn’t by itself provide for 100% federal payment for free meals. A statutory multiplier figure currently set as a 1.6 multiplier of the percentage of low income students is established, which in effect requires over 60% low income student presence to insure 100% federal financial coverage of free meals. Efforts are underway at USDA to reduce the 40% eligibility threshold to 25% and to have Congress increase the 1.6 multiplier to 2.5 to assure greater participation by school districts in Community Eligibility.

² This data is from the FY 22 school year and is compiled by Food Research and Action Center Database, [Community Eligibility Data \(frac.org\)](https://frac.org)

³ This initiative does not mean we will in fact have universal free breakfasts in every PA school as this Legislature has yet to require that all school districts have any breakfast meals program. And even if funds are available for these free breakfasts there is considerable discretion among districts and more particularly school principals on whether they see the importance of school breakfasts, have the motivation to address added burdens in school day timing, breakfast delivery and trash issues, and measures insuring breakfast take-up and appeal among students.

As you may know, federal pandemic school meals waivers have allowed for universal free lunches and breakfasts nation-wide, but they ended last school year. Yet the data is conclusive from this recent period that universal free meals result in increased academic achievement, improved diet quality, reduced food insecurity, and it has the potential to reduce obesity by improving BMI.⁴

One of the particular benefits of universalizing school meal access is that it ends the terrible stigma and discrimination that attends to children who receive free meals. The risk of stigma is a contributing factor for children refusing to take advantage of free or reduced-price school meals despite the hunger they may endure. And sadly, stigma is concomitant with the Dickensian school meal debt that is so pervasive in our state. Dickensian as well because PA by law allows school districts to restrict students' privileges and activities for families who owe money on school meals. The added benefit of enabling universal free meal access is the reduction of paperwork and administrative costs borne by school districts administering means tested meals programs.

Far too many PA children are not eligible for free school meals under the Community Eligibility criteria due to the federal means testing funding formula which provides that a school district's enrollment must be nearly 2/3 low-income children for the district to meet the federal funding criteria for 100% reimbursement for all free meals served. Many school districts have pockets of poor children or might technically qualify but with fewer low-income students than needed for 100% federal funding, and thus they refuse to participate.

⁴ J. Cohen et al., "Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review," 13 *Nutrients* 911 (March 11, 2021).

(As noted earlier, only 74% of the nation’s schools that demonstrated low-income student eligibility for the federal Community Eligibility Program participate in it.) Universal meals is the answer to insure that no school child goes hungry in any school in Pennsylvania.

Raising State Supplemental Funding by Continuing Pandemic Supplements to School Districts

Pennsylvania does not need to wait for federal policy changes to make sure fewer children suffer from hunger. This body can take immediate action and update the State Supplemental funding to local districts for school meals. Unchanged since 2001, Pennsylvania’s basic 10 cents a meal supplement (12 cents if participating in the federal lunch and breakfast programs, 14 cents if breakfast participation is over 20%), recognizes, as do a majority of states, that federal meals reimbursements are inadequate to meet rising food and staffing costs, and the capital improvements in kitchens and other facilities.⁵ In the over 20 years that PA’s supplement has been frozen, food costs have risen nearly 60%.⁶

Most school food programs are “enterprise funds” meaning that they are expected to generate revenue to meet their meals and operating costs. Without an adequate state supplement a school food services director has told me that the resulting pressure to reduce food service costs drives down the nutritional quality of school meals causing districts to rely, for example, on cheaper, less nutritional iceberg lettuce instead of dark green lettuce; not providing fresh fruits; not serving whole grain breads;

⁵ Pennsylvania’s current 10 to 14 cents supplement, compares poorly to New Jersey with a 55 cents supplement; California, which has a 24 cents supplement; and Delaware which supplements up to 70% of school food services staff. [School-Meals-State-Legislation-Chart.pdf \(frac.org\)](#).

⁶ See [Food Inflation in the United States \(1968-2023\) | US Inflation Calculator](#).

and limiting food items and mixed menus that make the school meal offering less appealing to students.

The pandemic's extra federal funding established a 40 cents supplement for school district's lunches, and 15 cents for breakfasts. But these funds expire this June 30, 2023. We recommend that the Legislature raise the state supplement by continuing to pay the districts at the level districts received for the FY 23 for the next school year. Thereafter, we recommend that the state supplement for school meals be increased annually, via legislation that requires the supplement to be indexed for inflation. Doing so can avoid another 20 plus years of inaction.

Increased state supplements can also be designed to target allied nutrition policy objectives. Most importantly, we urge that the supplement increases be on a graduated scale to build in an incentive for school districts to serve free breakfasts, i.e. a considerably higher supplement for those who do so, which is critical in a state that otherwise doesn't require breakfast programs in every school.

Oregon is also considering an additional use of state supplement funding to close the gap in the federal Community Eligibility program. This would use state funds to top up federal reimbursements that would enable schools that now meet the poverty student eligibility for CEP to attain 100% funding for free meals served in their CEP, and thus choose to participate in CEP.

Among the many demands for new resources in the state budget, feeding our children should come first. And, given the hefty state budget revenue surplus, there is every reason to compensate school districts for the rising cost of food and food services operations.

Legislation Requiring Inter-Departmental Food Program Coordination and a Deputy under the Governor for Anti-Hunger Programs

There is far more the executive branch can do to save children from hunger. Consider the fact that at least four major anti-hunger programs targeted at children are administered by three separate state agencies: the School Lunch and Breakfast programs and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) in the Education Dept.; the WIC program (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) in the Health Dept.; SNAP (formerly Food Stamp program) at DHS. Legislation requiring the formation of an interagency council to end child hunger, with anti-hunger advocates included, could boost coordination among these programs significantly, maximize food program participation and expand nutrition outreach.

For example, families receiving school meals could get referred by the Education Dept. and local schools to the SNAP and other food programs so they can afford nutritious dinner, meals all summer and on the weekend; a free school meals family could get referred to WIC for the infant sibling at home; and early education programs could connect families with food programs.

A family losing Medical Assistance this year at DHS from the pandemic's unwinding of continuous MA coverage should be informed of various food support programs within DHS and across the state's agencies.

Gov. Shapiro said in his budget address, "It shouldn't be OK to anyone here, especially when we're talking about a 44-billion-dollar budget, that people are going to bed hungry and kids are going all day without a meal."

Now is the time for legislation to create this inter-agency anti-hunger council and to make it accountable to the Governor's Office so Gov. Shapiro can provide the effective and motivated leadership to do even more to deliver on his compassionate call to action.

On behalf of Children First PA we thank you for your commitment to end student hunger in Pennsylvania and for this opportunity to testify today.

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