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May 14, 2018

The Honorable Sonia Chang-Diaz, Senate Chair
The Honorable Alice Peisch, House Chair
Joint Committee on Education
State House, Boston MA 02133

RE: An Act to Promote Student Nutrition, Senate 2390/House4422

Dear Chairwomen Chang-Diaz and Peisch:

The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts (FBWM) urges the Joint Committee on Education to favorably consider Senate 2390/House 4422, which would address school policies which seek to shame children because their parents owe school meal lunch debt. Since 1982, The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts has been feeding our neighbors in need and leading the community to end hunger. We distribute food to our member agencies in Berkshire, Franklin, Hampden and Hampshire counties. These independent pantries, meal sites and shelters are on the front lines of emergency food assistance in our region, playing a crucial role helping individuals, families, seniors and children. The FBWM is also a SNAP outreach partner. We directly assist low income individuals and families who wish to apply for federal SNAP nutrition benefits, and we support initiatives that expand access to free and reduced-price meals in elementary and secondary schools, including legislation to provide students with breakfast after the bell.

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is one of the most important federal programs to combat child hunger and improve school attendance and outcomes for elementary and secondary school students in western Massachusetts and the nation. Further, the NSLP Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a proven way to ensure that all children who need it are not denied a meal and to remove unnecessary paperwork in the administrative procedure. As a result, children who do not qualify for a free or reduced meal through NSLP because they have incomes above 185% of the Federal Poverty Line or whose parents have not applied for the program must pay for a meal at either a reduced price or the full price. There is ample data that shows that children who do not get enough nutrition do not perform well academically in school, which outcomes affect their retention, graduation and college admission rates.

Through our work with local food pantry partners and our SNAP outreach, we are deeply aware of the struggles of low income western Massachusetts families

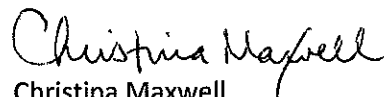
face, especially with seasonal employment as the farming and tourism industries close down in winter months. We know that families can be employed one month and lose their job the next month because of breakdown of transportation, an illness in the family, separation or incarceration of a parent. Families often in crisis are not always aware they can apply for free or reduced-price meal status any time of year. Some school districts may not promote the NSLP free/reduced-price application if a family has run out of funds on their "school bucks" accounts or has meal debt. And while this NSLP information is often posted on the school district website, the lack of broadband in western Massachusetts makes it impossible for many low-income families to get this information.

Further, many of the families served by the FBWM are not always aware that receiving SNAP benefits means their children are automatically eligible for free meal status. Our SNAP outreach team works hard to enroll families in SNAP, because the SNAP benefit triggers these additional free school meals.

As you know, the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute recently published a report showing too many Massachusetts schools have policies requiring children with debt or lacking funds to be denied food, especially at the high school level. Some districts have policies that require cafeteria staff to swap out the hot meal for a cold sandwich if a child has reached an "account cap." And some districts also bar students as well as their siblings from participating in extracurricular activities, receiving grades, or getting a cap and gown if there is any meal debt. In contrast, we are pleased that in June of 2017, the Amherst/Pelham School District adopted a very positive policy on school meal charges to ensure all children are fed and ready to learn and that meal debt matters should be worked out between adults--parents/legal guardians and the school district.

We urge the Joint Committee on Education to favorably report out S.2390 and H. 4422, legislation which will help reduce meal debt, maximize federal reimbursement and ensure that children are not punished or embarrassed while schools and parents work to resolve meal charges.

Sincerely,



Christina Maxwell

Director of Programs

The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts