

Grandparent Advocacy Project, Testimony of Kerry Bickford

Joint Committee on Education, May 15, 2018

In Support of S.2390 and H.4422: An Act to Promote School Nutrition

My name is Kerry Bickford and I am here representing the Grandparent Advocacy Project and Support Groups, along with the Cape Cod Neighborhood Support Coalition and the Family Resource Network on Cape Cod. I am testifying today in Support of Senate 2390 and House 4422, an Act to Promote School Nutrition.

I was appointed to the Commission on the Status of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren by Governor Patrick in 2009, and served as vice chair for four years and secretary for four more. I am currently serving the Commission as the Chair of the newly formed Advisory Council and I facilitate support groups for local organizations. I am also a grandparent raising two grandchildren, ages 14 and 16.

In my work with the Commission, I chair the Information and Referral Committee, which was basically formed to gather and streamline information for grandparents who are looking for available programs, funds and services that their grandchildren are eligible for. We discovered, early on, that there was a lot of confusion over who qualified for what government benefits, so we created one page information sheets to try to reduce the confusion and point grandparent, already stresses to the max, in the right direction. In both Listening tours (in 2009 and 2015), we heard from grandparents and providers about how frustrated they were feeling over the discrepancies about financial programs available to the children, including SNAP (food stamp) benefits and school lunch eligibility.

I guess the most frustrating thing to all of us, providers and grandparents alike, was that there was no consistency among school districts in Massachusetts about how eligibility for free school meal status was being administered between school districts. If that alone were not enough to feel discouraged, we began receiving calls and hearing stories in support groups about

grandchildren whose caregivers were told they were ineligible for school lunch programs due to the *grandparents'* income. These are grandparents who have not legally adopted the children and who apply for and receive MassHealth (Medicaid) for their grandchildren – health coverage which is based on the child's income only. It's our understanding that – under the federal National School Lunch Program - if a child receives a federal benefits such as MassHealth, the child should be automatically eligible for free meal status if the child's gross income is under 130% of the federal poverty level and grandparent income does not count. It is up to each school district to check the state data bases that confirm if a child gets MassHealth, SNAP (food stamps) or TAFDC cash assistance.

However, we have heard from grandparents and other caregivers that school districts were not regularly checking the Medicaid lists to approve the child for free meals, or double checking if a child's name or date of birth is transposed. Most districts check these data bases at the beginning of the school year, but these grandchildren often come into homes midstream in a school year. Often, we hear that districts are asking grandparents or other caregivers to fill out the school meal paper applications, which ask for the grandparent's income. I want to underscore – these are grandparents and other caregivers who have not legally adopted the children and, by law, their income does not count for MassHealth.

Other times, we received calls about grandparents who have literally inherited meal debt, debt that had been building while the child's earlier family situation was spiraling out of control. Some school districts district carry over that meal debt to the new caregiver of that child, even though the child is no longer living with his or her parents and the grandparent has no legal obligation for that debt. That is simply wrong. Indeed, in many of these cases, the child would still likely have been eligible for free meal status while still living within a challenging family situation but the application for free meal status fell through the cracks, like everything else.

Grandparents, who were already dipping into their savings and retirement funds to care for these kids, have been often turned away, or unaware of how to get free meal status for their

grandchildren, because they received the wrong information or because the school district just did not thoroughly check the available data bases. It seems like this could be a fix that would be not so difficult.

The legislation before you, S.2390 and H.4422, would require school districts to take proactive steps to make sure that every child is regularly checked against the Medicaid, SNAP and TANF data bases to see if the child is automatically eligible for free school meals – including at any point a child appears to have meal debt. This proactive step alone will boost federal reimbursement and likely eliminate meal debt for our grandchildren. The legislation before you would require school districts to proactively reach out to a family in crisis and even file a school meal application on behalf of a child if the school principal or designee perceives the family to be in crisis. That step could likely reduce accumulating meal debt where a child may be still living with parents who seem in crisis and unable to even file a school meal application. The federal rules allow school districts to take this step for individual cases and the school is reimbursed through the federal program, so it's not like they are losing money on this.

Most importantly, this legislation would prevent school districts from punishing children by serving the “alternate” cheese sandwich if they are in debt instead of the regular hot meal that's served their peers. It would prevent school districts from punishing children by barring them from extracurricular activities or not receiving grades or not receiving a cap and gown at graduation. And for grandparents raising grandchildren, we can tell you that requiring these grandchildren to suffer through the humiliation of a cheese sandwich, witness their hot meals tossed or not do extracurricular activities – solely because the school says someone owes money for meal debt - deeply harms their fragile emotional beings, as I am sure it does for any child. This is not how we should be treating our children. I will tell you that the Barnstable Public Schools has been exemplary in making every effort to qualify eligible children for free school meal status, but this is not the case in many school districts.

I was sitting in my living room the other night watching a commercial, I am sure you have all seen it. In this commercial, a young boy is sitting at his school desk with an empty lunch pail on his desk. All the children around him are chattering and eating from their own lunch boxes. He gets up to go to the water fountain, and when he comes back, he notices that there is food in the lunch pail now. The children are seemingly oblivious around him, but they are all smiling, and it is clear that some amazing child or caring adult stepped in and asked everyone to make a small contribution. There is no shaming and no blaming and everyone, in this commercial, wins. I would like to think that as caring adults, we too can take notice of the kids who are arriving daily with no lunch or money, and help the adults in their life navigate a difficult situation. It feels like this would work so much better than handing the child a cheese sandwich, banning the child from after school sports, or making the child feel inferior for any reason. Our job is to nurture and raise children up - not to beat them down. It's not their fault that the adults in their life are experiencing difficult times. The lesson in humanity could go a long way.

I urge the Committee to give a favorable report to S.2390 and H.4422. Thank you for listening to my testimony, and for all that you do for children, youth and families every day.