

Testimony on S. 2390 and H. 4422

Joint Committee on Education Hearing – Massachusetts State House

May 15, 2018

The Greater Boston Food Bank supports any policy change that that will enable students to have access to a healthy and nutritious meal, promoting equity in school meals across the Commonwealth.

Chairwoman Chang-Diaz, Chairwoman Peisch and Committee Members:

As a representative of The Greater Boston Food Bank and the leader of the Rise and Shine Massachusetts coalition, I support any legislation that will create more equitable access to school meals across the Commonwealth and alleviates hunger among our students, which is why I'm here to speak in favor of Senate bill 2390 and House bill 4422, An act to promote student nutrition.

At The Greater Boston Food Bank, our mission is to end hunger in Eastern Massachusetts. Annually, we distribute the equivalent of over 50 million healthy meals to individuals and families at risk of hunger in the 190 cities and towns we serve. Through our nearly 30 School-Based pantry programs, we see firsthand the impact hunger has on children and their families.

According to new data reported by Feeding America, children have a higher risk of food insecurity than the general population in our state. In Eastern Massachusetts, 1 in 9 children is food insecure, while across Massachusetts, 1 in 8 children may go to bed hungry on any given night.

We've learned it takes a multitude of resources being brought to bear through the actions, policies and programs of a variety of partners from the government, public and private sectors to address food insecurity. Which is why it is so important we work together on this issue.

The two federal nutrition programs most critical to alleviating childhood hunger are the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program. For low-income families that rely on SNAP (also known as food stamps), school meals ensure their children eat at least two healthy meals a day, helping families stretch their limited benefits even further. For food-insecure families not eligible for SNAP, the meals their children receive in school may be the only thing they eat all day.

According to the Mass Law Reform Institute's recent study, *Denying Food and Shaming Children: Unpaid School Meal Policies in Massachusetts*, local school districts have varying policies for how to manage student meal debt. I recognize this issue can be challenging for schools, as they must balance ensuring students are fed and ready to learn with making sure costs of labor and food are covered. However, as a Commonwealth we must not allow policies that deny our children nutritious food due to financial circumstances out of their control. School meal debt shaming is an impediment to providing hungry children with the food necessary to learn and to grow up healthy.

Within 154 Massachusetts school districts, the report identified a range of issues including “no charge” policies, where students without money to pay for a meal are simply not fed and stay hungry the entire day; policies setting “account caps,” after which cafeteria workers are directed to toss the hot meal and instead serve the child a cold sandwich; policies authorizing staff to speak directly to the child about their meal debt; and aggressive tactics to collect unpaid meal debt like barring students and siblings from extracurricular activities, denying report cards, and withholding graduation caps and gowns.

While many schools may not adhere to these policies in practice, we must ensure that our written policies reflect and uphold our everyday values. No student should go hungry and feel ashamed if they cannot afford a meal in our schools. The stigma attached to not being able to afford a school meal is punishment enough. A standard Massachusetts policy across our school system would provide consistency and fairness for each student.

We can address school meal debt appropriately by not punishing students or siblings for school meal debt, communicating directly with a responsible adult, and encouraging schools with 40 percent or more economically disadvantaged students to adopt the community eligibility program (CEP), so that more students qualify for free and reduced-price meals.

Therefore, I am here today in support of legislation that would create a standard of policies across all Massachusetts school districts for how to address this issue. I also believe we must work with our schools and school nutrition departments on the best ways to address these issues, for they are the ones that are working every day in our schools feeding our children. We would be happy to discuss any section of the legislation or my testimony further with Committee members.

No child in Massachusetts should go to school and feel hungry or punished for their financial situation.

Thank you.

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