

May 11, 2018

**The Honorable Sonia Chang-Diaz, Senate Chair
The Honorable Alice Peisch, House Chair
Joint Committee on Education**

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

Dear Chairwomen Chang-Diaz and Peisch:

My name is Kelly Love, and I'm a resident of Norwood, MA and I am writing you to ask for your support of Senate 2390/House 4422 which would address the problem of school policies which seek to shame children or treat them differently because their parents owe school meal lunch debt.

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is one of the most important federal programs to combat child hunger and improve school attendance and outcomes. I grew up in New York City, and from Kindergarten until the 5th grade, I qualified for free breakfasts and lunches at my public school due to my family's income. As the daughter of working parents, and a home where one parent was out of the home for much of this time, I relied heavily on the school system to provide me with nutritious breakfasts and lunches, especially on those days when my mom didn't have the time, energy, or food to send me to school with appropriate meals.

I am thankful that some friend or family member helped my mom understand that we were qualified for free meals, and helped her sign up for them, but there are many students whose parents do not know that they can apply for this benefit, or that they can apply at any time during the year if their income or living situation changes. I am also thankful that we easily met the income threshold for this program, but many low-income and working families in Massachusetts may not qualify for a free or reduced meal through NSLP because they have incomes above 185% of the Federal Poverty Line. Families above this low income threshold may still struggle to send their children to school with nutritious breakfasts and lunches for the same reasons my mother did—even with the best planning, life happens, and parents might not have the resources to send their children to school with the meals or money necessary to purchase meals.

The Massachusetts Law Reform Institute recently published a report showing that too many Massachusetts schools have policies requiring children to be denied food and publicly shamed for the school meal debt of their parent or guardian. This includes my school district in Norwood, Massachusetts. Although I am proud of our local schools, and our school committees, I believe that education is most effective for children who do not go to school hungry, and who feel supported, not shamed, by their school. I think the legislature is best suited to pass a bill with a clear message to all MA school districts on our condemnation of meal shaming policies, and laying out a blueprint for school districts for appropriate meal provision policies for students who cannot pay.

Senate 2390/House 4422 would prevent a child from being purposefully shamed for the debt of their parents or denied food as a form of punishment. It would do this by:

- Establishing that no school official may delay or deny food to a child or sibling as a form of punishment due solely to unpaid meal debt.
- Removing ability of a school district to establish policies that shame a child or to treat a child differently, including serving a different meal, when their family has accrued unpaid school meal debt.

- Require school districts to take steps to maximize federal NSLP reimbursements and to pursue the Community Eligibility (universal free meals to all) provision if the district is otherwise eligible to do so.
- Require school districts to limit conversations and communications about debt between adults: parents /legal guardians and school districts.

I fully support both Senate 2390 and House 4422. I respectfully request favorable consideration by the Joint Committee on Education.

Sincerely,

Kelly Anthoula Love

Associate, Health Law

University of Massachusetts, Center for Health Law and Economics

CC: Honorable Mike Rush
Honorable John Rogers
Honorable James O'Day
Honorable Patricia Jehlen