

TESTIMONY OF NANCY FISHER
Joint Committee on Education, May 15, 2018
In Support of S.2390 and H.2244: An Act to Promote School Nutrition

My name is Nancy Fisher. I am a registered dietitian working with Boston Public Schools Food and Nutrition Services, as well as with other organizations in Massachusetts support healthy eating and food access for kids.

In the Boston Public School District, we are very fortunate that all students are offered breakfast, lunch, summer, and after school meals for free. That's because Boston has a high percent of low households that qualify the District for universal free meals under a special federal option called "community eligibility." In most other districts across the Commonwealth, students generally pay for their meals, unless the individual child is from a low-income household that knows about and has qualified to receive meals at no cost.

I'd like to speak in support of legislation filed by Senator Cynthia Creem and Representative Anthony Vargas, *An Act to Promote Student Nutrition*: This legislation is intended to assure that Massachusetts school districts maximize federal meal reimbursements to reduce meal debt on families and that students

do not experience “lunch shaming” -- a label that refers to the humiliation of a child or refusal of food services staff to serve a meal to a child at the lunch line check out because of a question of payment. Please note, it is my understanding that this bill does NOT create an “unfunded mandate” on school districts. It does not require districts to provide all students with free unreimbursed meals unless the districts otherwise qualifies for the federal community eligibility option.

School meal debt is an adult problem, not a child problem. Children should not be held accountable if their parents fail to send in lunch money or load up funds in an on-line meal account, nor should children be held accountable for the economics of running a school meals program. Further, I believe students should not be stigmatized for insufficient funds, which stigma can affect them emotionally and academically even if they eventually get something to eat.

But, in some settings, adults fail to see the higher purpose of school meals -- to remedy hunger and food insecurity; to equip the student for effective learning. Adults can be blinded by the pressures of food service financial management. Or, perhaps the adult just needs the guidance and a stepwise process, as described in the proposed legislation, to do the right thing. For example, when a child has no

money or a couple of unpaid meals, that can be a flag for the food services department to check available data bases to see if the child might be receiving a federal benefit like SNAP or Medicaid benefits that give the child automatic free meal status. The food services staff can send the parent a bill for the meals, accompanied by an encouraging note and application for free or reduced-price status. The food services staff can urge the family to apply for SNAP benefits, which serve families under 200% of the poverty level and also qualify students for free meal status. The district can also file a free meal application for a child they perceive to be in financial need, even if the parents do not take action. All these steps can reduce meal debt on families and bring federal meal reimbursement to the district.

Just last week, I mentioned my support of policies to end lunch shaming to a colleague, and realized the impact on adults – some of it lifelong. The adult in front of me recalled being shamed when she was a youngster. She still felt the pain of having no money to pay for lunch and being treated poorly. How very unfortunate.

I have also known of food service employees who empathize with the kids and take action, personally. They said that, often, they just ignored the inability of a child to pay and gave away the meal. Some food service employees actually paid for student meals themselves. Clearly they were grounded enough to know what was right, even if school District leadership didn't.

A 2014 federal report found 39 percent of districts nationwide hand out cheap alternative meals with no nutritional requirements and up to 6 percent refuse to serve students with no money.

Fortunately, states are beginning to set policies to address lunch shaming so that students are not singled out at mealtimes. New Mexico was the first state to pass a policy to address school meal shaming in April 2017. Since that time, an additional six states have followed suit. It is time for Massachusetts to take this step. I strongly urge the Committee to give a favorable recommendation to Senate Bill 2390 and House Bill to remedy the unacceptable lunch shaming practices in some of our Massachusetts school districts.

Thank you.