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House of Representatives
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HUMAN SERVICES
JUDICIARY
HUNGER CAUCUS, CO-CHAIR

March 13, 2023

Governor Josh Shapiro
Office of the Governor
508 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Governor Shapiro,

First, congratulations on a fantastic first Budget Address. I look forward to working with you to provide the best possible quality of life for everyone in our Commonwealth.

As you highlighted in your Address, one in seven children in Pennsylvania are food insecure, meaning they lack consistent access to enough nutritious food to lead an active, healthy life. In Western Pennsylvania, it is one in six children. Both are greater than the national average. As you are no doubt aware, hungry students are more likely to skip school, score lower on tests, repeat a grade, be suspended from school, get sick, or even be hospitalized. So I was deeply gratified to see that you included providing free breakfast for all Pennsylvania K-12 public school students in your budget proposal, acknowledging that school meals are one of the main sources of food for school-aged children. The proposal to provide free lunch to the approximately 22,000 students who qualify currently for reduced lunch is also heartening. However, as we now begin the 2023-2024 budget negotiations in earnest, I believe that your proposal does not go far enough.

At the start of the pandemic, the federal government provided funding and waivers from regulations to ensure that all students had access to breakfast and lunch whether they were learning in person or remotely. Last year, Congress extended these pandemic meal waivers through Summer 2022, provided supply chain flexibilities, and continued temporary increases of federal reimbursements for schools during the 2022-2023 school year. Under Governor Wolf, Pennsylvania stepped up and provided all students continued access to free breakfast for this school year, and your budget proposes to continue that program indefinitely.

Unfortunately, around 29% of children who experience food insecurity do not even qualify for the free or reduced lunch programs. Additionally, students who do qualify for free or reduced lunch programs often face stigma and even bullying. And there are schools in Pennsylvania that punish students for not being able to afford school meals by keeping track of so-called "lunch debt." One student at a school here in our Commonwealth received an out-of-school suspension for "theft" because he ate a lunch that he could not afford.

With an amount that equals just 0.007% of our Commonwealth's total budget, we could provide universal free meals – breakfast and lunch – for every Pennsylvania public school student, as well as increase the state supplement for current community eligible school districts and retire all student lunch debt. Accordingly, I request your support for the inclusion of line items in the 2023-2024 Budget that would guarantee that no child in the Pennsylvania public school system will go hungry during the time they are supposed to be learning. Specifically, I am requesting:

1. An estimated \$275 million in order for the Commonwealth to provide universal free school meals, breakfast and lunch, to all K-12 public school students, as was provided under USDA waivers during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. I ask that this be a continuing item in future budgets.
2. A \$30 million increase to the state supplement to the federal reimbursement rate for school meals to address the reimbursement shortfalls that districts with the highest rates of poverty – schools who are already using community eligibility to provide free meals for all students – continue to face, and which will be exacerbated once the federal “Keep Kids Fed Act” sunsets at the end of this school year.
 - a. This would raise the overall amount to \$60 million and be the first increase to this supplement in more than two decades. During those 20 years, the federal reimbursement, recognizing dramatically rising costs and increased need, has nearly doubled. In our post-COVID economy, this need has only become more profound and is guaranteed to be exacerbated by the decrease in SNAP benefits resulting from the end of federal COVID emergency assistance.
 - b. Pennsylvania schools are going to lose almost \$86 million when the temporary federal reimbursement increase from the “Keep Kids Fed Act” ends at the end of the school year. The loss of these funds will put schools in a worse position than before the pandemic due to inflation, supply chain issues, and staffing shortages.
3. A one-time appropriation of \$25 million to the Department of Education to be distributed to our schools in order to fully discharge any and all school lunch debt.

All told, the amount requested to ensure that no child enrolled in public school is forced to go hungry is a bargain, not just because it amounts to such a tiny percentage of our state’s overall budget, but also because the return on investment is exponential considering the savings in terms of improved student physical and mental health, avoided learning loss, and decreased classroom disruption, as well as the future opportunity and earning potential of every well-fed student.

The past three years have shown us how students and educators both benefit when school meals are free for all kids – higher attendance rates, more focused students, better classroom environments. Now is the time to take a step forward, not backward. States around the country have recognized the need to take decisive action on school meals. California, Maine, Colorado, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Nevada have all moved to fund healthy meals for all their students with state dollars. Securing this necessary funding would not only keep our Commonwealth competitive with those states and provide a major win for Pennsylvania students, but also would be a noteworthy first-year achievement for your administration.

If you have any follow-up questions, please do not hesitate to reach out: EKinhead@pahouse.net | 412-321-5523.

Sincerely,



Emily Kinhead
State Representative, District 20

CC: Rep. Jordan Harris, House Majority Appropriations Chair
Sen. Vincent Hughes, Senate Democratic Appropriations Chair
Secretary Russell Redding, Department of Agriculture
Acting Secretary Khalid Mumin, Ed.D., Department of Education
Secretary Michael Vereb, Office of Legislative Affairs