

Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Committees on Education and Children & Youth
Joint Meeting on the Importance of Childhood Nutrition and School Meals

Testimony from The Honorable Emily Kinkead
Member of the House of Representatives, 20th Legislative District

Chairwoman Bullock, Chairman Schweyer, Representative Jozwiak, Representative Topper, and members of the Education and Children & Youth committees – for those who do not know me, I am Emily Kinkead and I represent the people of the 20th Legislative District in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. Thank you for allowing me to testify about my legislation, HB 180, and one of the most basic, yet critically important, issues facing our Commonwealth: making sure our children – the future of our state – are fed and well nourished, and that food insecurity is eradicated from our communities.

First, let me take a moment to be very clear about what the word food insecure means. The USDA defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life. This can be a temporary situation for a family or can last a long time. It should be unacceptable to every person in this room that – in the richest country in the world – one person, child, or senior struggles with food insecurity. Yet, they do.

Across our Commonwealth, children are going hungry every single day. According to Feeding America's *Map the Meal Gap* report, one in seven children are food insecure. In my home county, Allegheny, the issue is worse as one in six children are food insecure.¹ These figures are based on data from the United States Census Bureau from the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, when government support programs in response to the outbreak of the virus were strong. But, as those supports ended, the issue of childhood hunger has only gotten worse. Experts anticipate that food insecurity rates will rise as new, updated data is published.

However, as members of the Legislature, we have an opportunity before us right now to make a critical investment in the fight against childhood food insecurity. My legislation, House Bill 180, would guarantee, under law, that every child enrolled in a Pennsylvania school will be provided with free a breakfast and lunch every school day of the year.

The data about the impact of childhood food insecurity is clear: students are more likely to skip school, score lower on tests, repeat a grade, be suspended from school, get sick, or even be hospitalized. We also know that school meals are one of the consistent sources of food for school age children. During the COVID-19 pandemic, laws passed by Congress and flexibilities and waivers issued by the United States Department of Agriculture ensured that all students – regardless of income or zip code – had access to free breakfast and lunch whether they were learning in person or remotely.

The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) just released a new report, *The Reach of School Breakfast and Lunch During the 2021–2022 School Year*. It found that when universal school meals were provided to all students during that school year over 15.5 million children received a breakfast, and 29.9 million children received a lunch on an average day during the 2021–2022 school year — an increase of nearly 1.6 million children (11.2 percent) in breakfast, and 10.1 million (51.1 percent) in lunch when compared

ⁱⁱ Hayes, Clarissa, and Crystal FitzSimons. Food Research and Action Center, 2023, *The Reach of School Breakfast and Lunch During the 2021–2022 School Year*, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/school-meals-2023.pdf>. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hayes, Clarissa, and Crystal FitzSimons



Testimony on Childhood Nutrition and School Meals

**Public Hearing of the House Children & Youth Committee
and House Education Committee**

**Sally Zubairu-Cofield
Director, Bureau of WIC
PA Department of Health**

March 30, 2023

in effect created barriers for many types of vendors that tend to be more available to families who struggle with low access to food, like independent groceries, bodegas, and corner stores. The same requirements for cleanliness, food safety, and business integrity remain in place – but by allowing vendors to stock less at federally set standards, it allows those with less capital to participate and has created opportunities for clients to purchase needed items within their neighborhood. Since 2020, PA WIC has seen 161 new vendors come online. It is our hope that this improved environment for PA WIC vendors will encourage even more to do so, and by extension, that more children will receive the nutrition they need to be healthy and thrive.

I deeply appreciate the opportunity to speak about the work of the PA WIC program and the committees' interest in PA WIC's role in the provision of childhood nutrition. I am happy to take any questions you may have at this time.



Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Committees on Children & Youth and Education
Joint Informational Hearing on the Importance of Childhood Nutrition and School Meals

Thursday, March 30, 2023
Room 515, Irvis Office Building

Statement of Mr. Shea Saman
Chief Financial Officer
Feeding Pennsylvania
20 Erford Road
Lemoyne, PA 17043

Dear Chairwoman Bullock, Chairman Schweyer, Representative Jozwiak, Representative Topper, and other members of the Children & Youth and Education committees,

Thank you for the invitation to testify today and for the opportunity to share a perspective on childhood hunger and nutrition. My name is Shea Saman, and I am the Chief Financial Officer at Feeding Pennsylvania. I also currently serve as the interim CEO.

Feeding Pennsylvania is the statewide association of nine Feeding America food banks. Our members include Philabundance, Second Harvest Food Bank of the Lehigh Valley, CEO Weinberg Food Bank, Helping Harvest Food Bank of Berks and Schuylkill, Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, Westmoreland County Food Bank, Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, Community Food Warehouse of Mercer County, and Second Harvest Food Bank of Northwest Pennsylvania. Together, we serve nearly 2 million people in all 67 counties in Pennsylvania, including over 500,000 children.

Our members serve as community hubs and distributors of charitable food. They acquire commodities through various means including wholesale purchases, retail donations, federal programs like The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and state programs like the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) and Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS). Then, they distribute these commodities to neighbors in need through a large, decentralized network of community partners such as church pantries, senior centers, and other community organizations. Annually, the Feeding Pennsylvania network of food banks sources and distributes over 160 million pounds of food to neighbors in need.

The current approach to addressing hunger, and particularly child hunger, is a piecemeal but comprehensive approach. Different programs address different needs.

At food banks, our members support and provide food to youth-specific programs like school pantries and backpack programs, making sure every child, and their family, has access to fresh, nutritious food in the evenings and on weekends. Our food banks also sponsor and help administer federal programs, such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). These

programs provide children with nutritious meals at day cares, during afterschool programs, and in the summertime when schools are closed.

These efforts to ensure children eat when schools are closed are a key part of addressing childhood food insecurity. However, the largest and most comprehensive tools in addressing childhood food insecurity are while students are in school, through the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Pre-pandemic, these two programs served more than 30 million meals daily across the country, and that number has only continued to grow due to economic uncertainty and rising inflation. For some children, school meals are the only reliable source of food they have access to.

School nutrition programs are vital tools in reducing child hunger and supporting students' educational achievement. Multiple studies show that the availability of school meals reduces food insecurity among children¹. Students who face hunger are also more likely to repeat a grade, experience developmental impairments, and have social and behavioral problems². Plus, participation in these programs alleviates pressure on food banks while also freeing up funds for parents to pay for other necessities such as housing, medicine, or gas/vehicle expenses to travel to work.

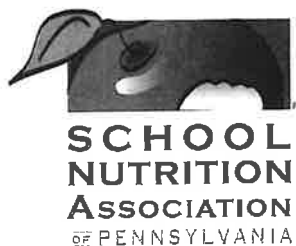
The role of the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP) as critical cornerstones in addressing child food insecurity cannot be understated. Food banks are, and will continue to be, there for neighbors and children in need. However, programs like SBP and NSLP, which serve children in need directly at their schools and in their communities, continue to be some of the most effective tools we have in combatting child hunger in our communities.

Considering the recent rise in demand for food assistance along with the sunset of SNAP Emergency Allotments, food banks and other nutrition programs will be needed more than ever. We thank the General Assembly for their interest in learning more about these important programs and encourage you to continue to support a comprehensive approach when it comes to addressing hunger in our communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to answering any questions you might have.

¹ Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). Retrieved from: https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning_FNL.pdf

² Feeding America. Retrieved from: <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/child-hunger-facts>



Testimony to The House Children & Youth and the House Education Committees on the Importance of Childhood Nutrition and School Meals

Nicole Melia, Public Policy and Legislative Chair of the School Nutrition Association of Pennsylvania

March 30th, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity for the School Nutrition Association of Pennsylvania to submit testimony in support of funding breakfast for all students and covering the cost of reduced-price eligible student meals in the state budget. Furthermore, we support House Bill 180 which would provide school breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students in the commonwealth during the school day. Since, 1955 the School Nutrition Association of Pennsylvania (SNAPA) has been proud to represent school food service professionals who make it their mission to impact positively the wellness of children through healthy school meals and to work to ensure high quality child nutrition programs are available in all schools in the commonwealth.

School meals are an essential part of the school day that ensure students are ready to learn. Extensive research has linked participation in school meals to a number of benefits:

- **improved academic achievement, standardized test scores, and cognitive function**
- **improved attendance, which is positively linked to academic achievement**
- **reduced food insecurity, which is linked to poor academic outcomes**
- **improved nutrition, such as increased consumption of fruit, vegetables, and milk**
- **improved overall health and long-term health outcomes, as well as reduction in obesity rates, anxiety, and depression**

Research shows that school meals provide the best diet quality as determined by the American Heart Association (AHA) diet score and the Healthy Eating Index (HEI), of all major food sources in the United States, without disparities for those of lower household income (Lui et al. 2021). This study looked at availability of food items that align with the Dietary Guidelines: fruit, vegetables, beans, whole grains, protein sources and fatty acids. School meals scored highest when compared to grocery stores and restaurants, because the nutrition standards that schools follow regularly provide all these food items.

Additionally, the high quality of the food offered did not change dependent on income status as it did for grocery stores and restaurants. **At school, students have the same access to high quality nutritious meals regardless of their background, race or ethnicity.**

During the 2022-2023 school year the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania funded breakfast at no cost to students in school, allowing us to serve even more students and ensuring they are well nourished and better prepared to learn. Among schools not participating in the Community Eligibility Program, **breakfast participation increased from 10% in 2018 to 34.4%**. Most importantly, it is not just those students who would normally pay for meals who participate more when meals are free of charge. In fact **participation of free-eligible students increased by 16% this school year while free breakfast is available for all students**. The stigma of receiving free meals is removed when all students can easily participate in the program. School meals become just another part of the school day for the benefit of all students.

The United Way ALICE (Asset limited, Income Constrained, Employed) Report from 2018 indicates that a family of four living in Pennsylvania, must earn at least \$69,648 a year to be able to afford the basic necessities to live. Yet, a family of four is not eligible to receive free school meals if their annual income exceeds \$39,000 per year. In 2020, the median house hold income in PA was \$67,587 which is below the income identified to afford basic housing, food, transportation and clothing, but well above the level to qualify for free school meals. The Income Eligibility Guidelines are no longer adequate to determine a family need for free school meals. They are antiquated and not representative of our challenging economic times.

The percentage of total enrollment of students who are eligible for free and reduced priced meals has increased from 54% in 2019 to 60% in 2022. **Two thirds of students in schools participating in the National School Lunch program are now eligible for free or reduced priced meals**. However, the Feeding America "Map the Meal Gap" - [Food insecurity among populations in the united states](#), reports **29% of children not eligible for free meals, due to income, are still experiencing food insecurity**. These statistics indicate that there is hunger in our state that needs to be addressed. Expanding access to school meals can ensure children have a consistent, nutritious breakfast and lunch each and every day.

On behalf of school nutrition professionals, serving our students in the cafeteria every day, we urge you to support HB 180 and at minimum maintain funding for breakfast and reduced priced meals in the state budget. Expanded access to school meals through breakfast and lunch at no cost is critical to guarantee funds spent on education is money well invested and every student is ready to learn.

Scan here for
www.SNAPA.org/MealsForAll
document links





Why School Meals for All?

No child should go hungry in Pennsylvania.

1 in 8 children in Pennsylvania experience food insecurity.

Studies show that school meals:

- Reduce childhood hunger
- Decrease childhood weight issues and obesity, and improve child nutrition and wellness
- Enhance child development and school readiness
- Support learning, attendance, and behavior
- Contributes to positive mental health outcomes
- Are the healthiest meals for many children

It's about equity:

- The existing policy for school meals, where some children are expected to pay while others receive their meals for free, creates stigma and shame for those students who rely on school meals for their basic needs, and a barrier for those students who are not eligible but are still experiencing food insecurity.
 - A family of four with two parents each making \$600 gross income per week, make just \$200 too much to qualify for free and reduced school meals. Factor in the costs of living in Pennsylvania and the financial impact free school meals would provide this family.
 - Due to the limitations of the current method of collecting family income data through school meal benefit applications and the restrictive USDA income guidelines, the school meal eligibility rate never fully captures the need.
- BIPOC students are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity.
- Students aren't expected to pay for books, desks, or bus fare. Why should school breakfast and lunch be any different?

School Meals for All would streamline and strengthen school nutrition programs:

- Participation by all students in school meal programs increases when meals are provided for free, resulting in increased revenue by way of federal reimbursements.
- School Meals for All would eliminate issues of unpaid school meal debt and reduced administrative paperwork, freeing up school nutrition staff to focus on feeding kids.

The impact of hunger on outcomes for children:

- Food insecurity leads to negative lifetime health outcomes for children especially after repeated exposure.
- Childhood food insecurity results in high costs to society.

Statement of Jonathan Stein for Children First PA
before the
PA House Children & Youth and Education Committees
March 30, 2023

Ending Hunger in Pennsylvania's Schools

Good morning, I am Jonathan Stein speaking for Children First PA and first want to thank each of the Representatives here from the Children & Youth and Education Committees for this hearing which we hope will be a major step toward ending hunger among children in Pennsylvania's schools. Children First PA (formerly Public Citizens for Children & Youth) works to improve the lives of our children in southeastern PA by developing initiatives and advocating for quality health care, child care, public education and family stability.

I have been for over 50 years a legal aid attorney, including in roles as Executive Director and General Counsel at Community Legal Services in Philadelphia, now retired. Over the past 35 years I worked to expand access to school meals under the federal School Lunch and Breakfast programs, and successfully advocated for and got adopted the nation's first universal-type school meals program at the Philadelphia School District. This model was embraced by the U.S. Congress in 2010 which codified a version of it as the Community Eligibility Provision ("CEP") to provide for a universal free school meals for high poverty school districts and schools (ones comprising at least 40% of low-income student populations).

CEP has resulted in greatly expanded participation in free lunches and breakfasts with 16.2 million children attending CEP schools in 2021-22.¹ We should all take pride that already over 1000 schools educating 533,000 students in the Commonwealth are now using this model to make sure the largest possible number of students are given free access to school meals every day².

But more must be done to make sure every child has the benefit of school meals. I am especially pleased to see that this torch for expanded free meals participation is being carried by those of you today who are considering further measures to effectively end hunger in Pennsylvania classrooms and enable students to reach their full potential in school achievement and to lead healthy lives into adulthood.

Adopting Universal Free School Meals in Pennsylvania

We applaud Gov. Josh Shapiro’s budget proposal for \$38.5 million to continue Gov. Wolf’s initiative for universal free breakfasts into the 2023-24 school year.³ But, we can and should do better than insure only that children will not go hungry for the first half of the school day. To end hunger for the entire school day the General Assembly should pass Rep. Emily Kinhead’s and Sen. Lindsey Williams’s, “No Student Should Go Hungry Universal School Meals” legislation.

¹ About 33,000 schools and 5,500 school districts nationally participated in Community Eligibility in the 2021-22 school year. And 74.3% of eligible schools adopted Community Eligibility. See <https://frac.org/community-eligibility>. Community Eligibility doesn’t by itself provide for 100% federal payment for free meals. A statutory multiplier figure currently set as a 1.6 multiplier of the percentage of low income students is established, which in effect requires over 60% low income student presence to insure 100% federal financial coverage of free meals. Efforts are underway at USDA to reduce the 40% eligibility threshold to 25% and to have Congress increase the 1.6 multiplier to 2.5 to assure greater participation by school districts in Community Eligibility.

² This data is from the FY 22 school year and is compiled by Food Research and Action Center Database. [Community Eligibility Data \(frac.org\)](https://frac.org/community-eligibility)

³ This initiative does not mean we will in fact have universal free breakfasts in every PA school as this Legislature has yet to require that all school districts have any breakfast meals program. And even if funds are available for these free breakfasts there is considerable discretion among districts and more particularly school principals on whether they see the importance of school breakfasts, have the motivation to address added burdens in school day timing, breakfast delivery and trash issues, and measures insuring breakfast take-up and appeal among students.

As you may know, federal pandemic school meals waivers have allowed for universal free lunches and breakfasts nation-wide, but they ended last school year. Yet the data is conclusive from this recent period that universal free meals result in increased academic achievement, improved diet quality, reduced food insecurity, and it has the potential to reduce obesity by improving BMI.⁴

One of the particular benefits of universalizing school meal access is that it ends the terrible stigma and discrimination that attends to children who receive free meals. The risk of stigma is a contributing factor for children refusing to take advantage of free or reduced-price school meals despite the hunger they may endure. And sadly, stigma is concomitant with the Dickensian school meal debt that is so pervasive in our state. Dickensian as well because PA by law allows school districts to restrict students' privileges and activities for families who owe money on school meals. The added benefit of enabling universal free meal access is the reduction of paperwork and administrative costs borne by school districts administering means tested meals programs.

Far too many PA children are not eligible for free school meals under the Community Eligibility criteria due to the federal means testing funding formula which provides that a school district's enrollment must be nearly 2/3 low-income children for the district to meet the federal funding criteria for 100% reimbursement for all free meals served. Many school districts have pockets of poor children or might technically qualify but with fewer low-income students than needed for 100% federal funding, and thus they refuse to participate.

⁴ J. Cohen et al., "[Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review.](#)" *Nutrients* 911 (March 11, 2021).

(As noted earlier, only 74% of the nation’s schools that demonstrated low-income student eligibility for the federal Community Eligibility Program participate in it.) Universal meals is the answer to insure that no school child goes hungry in any school in Pennsylvania.

Raising State Supplemental Funding by Continuing Pandemic Supplements to School Districts

Pennsylvania does not need to wait for federal policy changes to make sure fewer children suffer from hunger. This body can take immediate action and update the State Supplemental funding to local districts for school meals. Unchanged since 2001, Pennsylvania’s basic 10 cents a meal supplement (12 cents if participating in the federal lunch and breakfast programs, 14 cents if breakfast participation is over 20%), recognizes, as do a majority of states, that federal meals reimbursements are inadequate to meet rising food and staffing costs, and the capital improvements in kitchens and other facilities.⁵ In the over 20 years that PA’s supplement has been frozen, food costs have risen nearly 60%.⁶

Most school food programs are “enterprise funds” meaning that they are expected to generate revenue to meet their meals and operating costs. Without an adequate state supplement a school food services director has told me that the resulting pressure to reduce food service costs drives down the nutritional quality of school meals causing districts to rely, for example, on cheaper, less nutritional iceberg lettuce instead of dark green lettuce; not providing fresh fruits; not serving whole grain breads;

⁵ Pennsylvania’s current 10 to 14 cents supplement, compares poorly to New Jersey with a 55 cents supplement; California, which has a 24 cents supplement; and Delaware which supplements up to 70% of school food services staff. [School-Meals-State-Legislation-Chart.pdf \(frac.org\)](#).

⁶ See [Food Inflation in the United States \(1968-2023\) | US Inflation Calculator](#).

and limiting food items and mixed menus that make the school meal offering less appealing to students.

The pandemic's extra federal funding established a 40 cents supplement for school district's lunches, and 15 cents for breakfasts. But these funds expire this June 30, 2023. We recommend that the Legislature raise the state supplement by continuing to pay the districts at the level districts received for the FY 23 for the next school year. Thereafter, we recommend that the state supplement for school meals be increased annually, via legislation that requires the supplement to be indexed for inflation. Doing so can avoid another 20 plus years of inaction.

Increased state supplements can also be designed to target allied nutrition policy objectives. Most importantly, we urge that the supplement increases be on a graduated scale to build in an incentive for school districts to serve free breakfasts, i.e. a considerably higher supplement for those who do so, which is critical in a state that otherwise doesn't require breakfast programs in every school.

Oregon is also considering an additional use of state supplement funding to close the gap in the federal Community Eligibility program. This would use state funds to top up federal reimbursements that would enable schools that now meet the poverty student eligibility for CEP to attain 100% funding for free meals served in their CEP, and thus choose to participate in CEP.

Among the many demands for new resources in the state budget, feeding our children should come first. And, given the hefty state budget revenue surplus, there is every reason to compensate school districts for the rising cost of food and food services operations.

Legislation Requiring Inter-Departmental Food Program Coordination and a Deputy under the Governor for Anti-Hunger Programs

There is far more the executive branch can do to save children from hunger. Consider the fact that at least four major anti-hunger programs targeted at children are administered by three separate state agencies: the School Lunch and Breakfast programs and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) in the Education Dept.; the WIC program (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) in the Health Dept.; SNAP (formerly Food Stamp program) at DHS. Legislation requiring the formation of an interagency council to end child hunger, with anti-hunger advocates included, could boost coordination among these programs significantly, maximize food program participation and expand nutrition outreach.

For example, families receiving school meals could get referred by the Education Dept. and local schools to the SNAP and other food programs so they can afford nutritious dinner, meals all summer and on the weekend; a free school meals family could get referred to WIC for the infant sibling at home; and early education programs could connect families with food programs.

A family losing Medical Assistance this year at DHS from the pandemic's unwinding of continuous MA coverage should be informed of various food support programs within DHS and across the state's agencies.

Gov. Shapiro said in his budget address, "It shouldn't be OK to anyone here, especially when we're talking about a 44-billion-dollar budget, that people are going to bed hungry and kids are going all day without a meal."

Now is the time for legislation to create this inter-agency anti-hunger council and to make it accountable to the Governor's Office so Gov. Shapiro can provide the effective and motivated leadership to do even more to deliver on his compassionate call to action.

On behalf of Children First PA we thank you for your commitment to end student hunger in Pennsylvania and for this opportunity to testify today.

Jonathan Stein, Esq.

jonathanstein5@gmail.com

215-806-3393

Or contact

Donna Cooper, Executive Director

Children First

donnac@childrenfirstpa.org

215-563-5848 x301



PENNSYLVANIA
PARTNERSHIPS
FOR CHILDREN
A VOICE FOR KIDS SINCE 1992

200 North Third Street, 13th Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17101-1589

717-236-5680 | www.papartnerships.org

March 28, 2023

Honorable Members of the House Education and House Children & Youth Committees,

Each day, families struggle with food security and the ability to provide their children with healthy meals that fuel their minds and bodies. Lack of nutrient-rich food impacts child development, overall health outcomes, mental and behavioral health, and academic achievement, performance, and participation. Fortunately, Pennsylvania is poised with resources to support families struggling to meet basic needs and has seen an advancement in programs and initiatives that aim to assist low-income communities; however, many of those services have strict criteria for participation, are time limited, or have long wait lists. This contributes to many families not being eligible or able to access necessary services. No child should go hungry, and no parent should have to worry about how they are going to feed their child. Now is the time to act and work towards tangible solutions that uplift and stabilize families.

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children works to ensure every child living in Pennsylvania can thrive and reach their full potential; nutrition plays a huge role in making that a reality for families across the Commonwealth. Starting prenatally, access to quality nutrition provides a strong and stable foundation for lifelong health and well-being. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, commonly referred to as WIC, helps to provide this foundation for healthy habits by giving pregnant and postpartum mothers, infants and toddlers access to nutritious foods, breastfeeding supports, and health referrals. WIC helps to reduce the prevalence of household food insecurity, increases housing security, improves diet quality, and improves access to health care and social services. While the program offers many benefits, participation in WIC has been declining over the past several years due to antiquated systems that make accessing food and program support challenging. Based on February 2022 data, infants and children account for 77% of WIC participation across the state, yet the participation rate accounts for only half of the eligible population. Increasing WIC participation is an essential component to ensuring eligible children and families are accessing the nutritional supports they need to live healthy lives. Thriving PA released state and county-level [fact sheets](#) based on this data last year. Children are eligible to receive WIC until age 5, if they are living in families with an income at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level or are enrolled in Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Participants must also demonstrate a medical or nutritional risk. In some families, WIC may be the only source of food a child receives in a day, making it even more important to increase enrollment so more families and children can access the food they need.

During the public health emergency, several temporary changes were permitted to help families in accessing WIC benefits. Physical Presence Waivers are in place until the end of September 2023 which allow telehealth options for enrollment and re-enrollment, reducing unnecessary clinic visits. In addition, USDA increased WIC's Cash Value Benefit provided to families to purchase fruits and vegetables, making a significant difference for families, especially when inflation has increased the price of virtually everything. Prior to the pandemic, children and women were allotted \$9 and \$11 per month, respectively. With the increase in benefits, children receive \$25/month and pregnant and postpartum women receive \$44/month, a needed increase to afford the cost of fruit and vegetables for an entire month.

In addition to making some of the benefits provided during the public health emergency permanent, it is essential Pennsylvania address the declining participation in the WIC program through upgrading the technology to reload benefits remotely, again reducing the number of trips a family needs to make into a WIC clinic, as well as simplifying the application process and integrating it into COMPASS so families do not need to provide eligibility documentation more than once. Further, Pennsylvania should support federal legislation that would expand WIC eligibility to include children up to age 6 to ensure children who are not able to enter

kindergarten at age 5, due to their birthday, would still have access to healthy nutrition. By cutting WIC off for children at age 5, it creates a nutrition gap for children not yet enrolled in school and receiving nutritional support elsewhere.

As schools implemented in-home instruction for school-aged children, students no longer could rely on receiving meals in these settings. To support families in combating hunger challenges, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) implemented universal free meals, allowing schools to offer free meals to all students, regardless of family income. Waivers were also issued to allow families to receive multiple meals from schools at one time and removing requirements for students to eat in the cafeteria. The USDA issued waivers and expanded universal free meal program expired in the 2021-2022 school year, leaving states to create individualized policies or resume pre-pandemic protocols for identifying qualifying students. It is important to note that many families have continued to struggle financially, including continued food insecurity due to the ongoing economic disruption. There is considerable evidence of the important role that school meals play in alleviating poverty, supporting good nutrition, advancing learning, and improving overall health. The outcomes of the universal free meal program resulted in more students accessing nutritious meals.

Fortunately, Governor Tom Wolf implemented the universal free breakfast program effective October 1, 2022. This has allowed all students to access free breakfast regardless of income guidelines or other required criteria. By using the School Food Services General Fund appropriation from the prior year, \$21.5 million was allocated to support students in the 2022-2023 school year. However, this is set to expire at the end of the current school year.

Universal free lunch has not been provided in the current school year. The federal National School Lunch Program remains in effect, which is a tiered federal reimbursement system that provides free, reduced, or full-priced meals based on family income. However, not all families who qualify are accessing this support service. There is still a considerable amount of stigma about application for the program for fear of students being labeled as "poor", including increased bullying as a result. Administratively, there are also challenges for schools. Collecting meal eligibility applications and student tracking is cumbersome for families who are applying and schools who are qualifying them as eligible. This often leads to the under-identification of eligible students. Lastly, eligibility requires that a family falls between 130-180 percent under the Federal Poverty Line to qualify for free or reduced meals. In today's economy, families could fall just outside of this measure but still struggle to put meals on the table. Of the almost 1.7 million school aged children, 41% do not qualify for free or reduced lunch. Of the 59% that do qualify, it is unclear how many are able to access the program currently. Too many Pennsylvania students continue to go hungry every day, impacting their ability to learn.

PPC applauds the Shapiro administration for including \$38.5 million in the FY 2023-24 proposed budget. This initiative would continue to provide universal free breakfast to all students and lightly expand universal free lunch. However, it should not stop there. All students, regardless of their family income, should be provided with a free, nutritious breakfast and lunch.

Providing the foundation for children to perform well in school and lead healthy lives is at the core of nutritional support for families. An increasing number of families across the commonwealth are struggling to make ends meet. Many do not have the income to afford the growing cost of groceries and healthy foods for their children. Some children only receive one meal a day, either through school or other programs, and many children don't eat at all. Without access to nutritious food, children are not going to be able to reach their full potential to thrive. It is imperative this legislature and administration address the food crisis Pennsylvania families are facing by investing in nutritional programs that have proven positive outcomes, like WIC and school meals. With the pandemic supplemental relief winding down, even more families will be struggling to put food on their tables. No child should go hungry and PPC is committed to working with members of the General Assembly and the Shapiro Administration to ensure Pennsylvania is making investments in access to nutritional support for all children across the Commonwealth.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this information to the House Children and Youth and House Education Committees. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact PPC's Government Affairs Director, Kati Brillhart, at kbrillhart@papartnerships.org or Jordan Frederick, Government Affairs Associate, at jfrederick@papartnerships.org.

JUST HARVEST
Education Fund
317 East Carson Street, Suite 153
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15219
p 412 431 8960 f 412 431 8966
justharvest.org



Pennsylvania House Children & Youth and Education Committees
Joint informational meeting on Importance of Childhood Nutrition and School Meals.
Written Testimony of Ann Sanders Submitted May 28, 2023

Dear Chairs Bullock and Schweyer, Minority Chairs Jozwiak and Topper,

Thank you and the representatives from the Children & Youth and Education Committees for this joint informational meeting and this opportunity to submit written testimony. I am submitting this written testimony on behalf of Just Harvest.

Just Harvest works to end hunger through connecting families to stabilizing supports such as SNAP, WIC, and tax credits; improving healthy food access through farmers markets and retail interventions; and improving public policy to end systemic hunger. Just Harvest has worked to improve access to child nutrition since our foundation in 1986, with our first campaigns being around having schools provide breakfast programs.

Hunger is detrimental to any who experiences it, but it has long lasting impacts on children. Children who experience food insecurity tend to have more behavioral problems at school and in social situations, poorer educational outcomes, and suffer long term health implications.

Why Universal School Meals?

Nearly one million students in Pennsylvania already qualify for Free or Reduced-Price School Meals. However, the cut-off for this programs, eligibility is set at 185% of the federal poverty level. In 2018, the United Way of Pennsylvania's ALICE report¹ estimated that a family of four, with two school-age children, needed to earn \$4,200 a month to meet their basic needs in Warren County – the lowest cost in the Commonwealth . That same year, the cut off for reduced-price school meals was \$3,869 per month. In 2018, nearly 1 out of 3 children who experienced food insecurity lived in households where their family earned too much to qualify for nutrition assistance programs².

Prior to the pandemic, this legislative body discussed the problem of lunch shaming, where schools, desperate to collect unpaid lunch debt – would refuse meals to students,

¹ See United For ALICE, Cost of Living by Geography, Pennsylvania, 2018.

² See Feeding America Map the Meal Gap, 2018 Child (<18 Years) Food Insecurity In Pennsylvania

write notes on students' hands, or use other public tactics to try to recover unpaid lunch debts. In 2017, this body wisely passed legislation that limited such tactics – no child should be stigmatized for the financial struggles of their parents.

In 2019, under burgeoning rising unpaid debts, districts had to raid their general funds. The legislature eased the lunch shaming rules. Parents and school districts need to partner to ensure that children succeed in their education. That kind of partnership is easily soured when the district hires a collection agency to recover \$75 in unpaid lunch debt while a family is living paycheck to paycheck.

The pandemic allowed all districts to employ what was once only available to high schools: free school meals for all.³ Universal meals eases administrative burdens. Without having to worry about collections, nutrition departments can focus on providing quality, nutritious meals.

Furthermore, recent studies showed that universal free meals results in increased academic achievement, improved meals participation, improved diet quality and food security, and no change or improved BMI.⁴

To address all of these intertwining problems - child hunger, lunch shaming, and school lunch debt – the solution is school meals for all. Meals are an essential part of the school day and needed for educational success; educators should have sustained funds to provide them.

Supporting School Meal Success

Additionally, meal reimbursements need to be sufficient to cover the costs of meals. In recognition that the federal reimbursement rate is inadequate, most states offer a supplemental reimbursement per meal served. Pennsylvania's State Supplemental meal has been unchanged since 2001: reimbursement is 10 cents per meal (12 cents if the school participates in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Program, 14 cents if breakfast participation is over 20%). Since that time, food costs have risen nearly 60%.⁵ Increasing this rate is especially timely, as additional federal support of 40 cents per lunch, 10 cents per breakfast, is set to sunset June 30, 2023. We recommend that Pennsylvania double the current supplement, and make inflation-related adjustments to the supplement annually.

³ The Community Eligibility Provision allows schools to provide free school meals to all students. Only school with an Identified Student Participation rate (ISP) of 40% or more can participate. Students who are known to receive SNAP, medical assistance, or are in foster care are "identified students." The reimbursement rate partially reimburses meals for schools with ISP rates between 40% and 62.5%, and fully reimburses school with ISP rates above 62.5%.

⁴ J. Cohen et al., "Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review," 13 *Nutrients* 911 (March 11, 2021).

⁵ See Food Inflation in the United States (1968-2023) | US Inflation Calculator.

Easing administrative burdens and providing adequate funding helps nutrition departments and administrators focus on practices that ensure that students actually eat healthy meals. School bell schedules often make grabbing school breakfast difficult, or may provide too little time for student to eat lunch. Initiatives like Grab-and-Go and Breakfast after the Bell have been shown to increase breakfast participation. Similarly, there known initiatives that get kids excited about eating healthy foods such as Farm to School, School Learning Gardens, and cooking classes. While there are frequently foundation and federal grants that support such efforts, we would like to see grant opportunities that support these efforts funded again in the state budget.

Child Nutrition from Cradle to Career

While school meals are critically important to the well-being and education success of students, it is part of a broader set of programs that ensure kids can eat healthy from birth to graduation.

Several of these programs fall under the Department of Education's Division of Food and Nutrition including: the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program; Summer Meals, which help fill the gap by offering congregate meals during summer months at camps and parks; Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), which funds meals at pre-K, child care centers, and after school programs.

The Department of Health administers WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children), which serves 128,000 infants and young children - as well as nearly 50,000 pregnant and post-partum parents. WIC participation is also associated with positive early development outcomes that continue into the school-age years⁶.

The Department of Human Services administers SNAP (The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or food stamps), which supports nearly 700,000 children. SNAP and the National School Lunch Program have a unique link in that children who receive SNAP are directly certified for free school meals (one less application for schools to process, or parents to fill out). Also, the percentage of students who participate in SNAP impacts a school's eligibility for universal school meals and, if they do provide universal meals, the school's federal reimbursement rate. (SNAP enrollment also qualifies a pregnant/post-partum parents, infants, and young children for WIC, but they still must apply separately.)

The Department of Human Services was also tasked with administering Pandemic EBT, a benefit that functions much like SNAP but eligibility is conferred based on a child's enrollment in Free or Reduced Price School Meals. While P-EBT is a temporary program and will end soon, the newly created permanent Summer EBT program will have similar eligibility rules and require similar levels of school district, Department of Education, and DHS coordination to implement.

Communication and coordination between these programs is vital, but requires staff time - and sometimes better data systems - to do it well. Much as health care providers now frequently refer to nutrition programs, educators should have tools and resources to make those referrals. A

⁶ Jackson, Margot I. "Early childhood WIC participation, cognitive development and academic achievement." Social science & medicine (1982) vol. 126 (2015): 145-53

pre-K program should have resources to connect families to WIC; a district that is promoting Summer Food should also send out information about SNAP.

Nutrition impacts child development, school readiness, the summer slide – and so nutrition both in and outside of school matter.

In conclusion we recommend the following:

- Passing HB 180 and SB 180 to ensure that school meals are available to all learners.
- Increasing the state supplement for the first time since 2001, to ensure that meal reimbursements are adequate.
- Funding innovation grants for initiatives that increase meal participation and nutrition education.
- Resourcing state departments and educators to improve cross-program enrollment in nutrition programs.

On behalf of Just Harvest, thank you for your commitment to ending student hunger and for this opportunity to provide testimony.

Sincerely,


Ann Sanders

Public Policy Advocate, Just Harvest

Contact: anns@justharvest.org, 412-431-8960x109