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**Testimony on H-7337, School Meals
House Finance Committee
May 7, 2024**

Good afternoon Chairperson Abney and members of the House Committee on Finance. My name is Jocelyn Antonio, and I am the Director of Program Implementation and Policy at the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute at the Brown University School of Public Health. I am providing this testimony in my individual capacity.

I strongly urge your favorable consideration and passage of House Bill 7337 – An Act Relating to Education – Federal Aid, sponsored by Senator Cano and co-sponsored by Senators Acosta, Lawson, Mack, DiMario, Valverde, Miller, Lauria, and DiPalma.

This bill proposes the visionary step of creating a **universal school breakfast and lunch program** that would provide free meals to all Rhode Island students attending all public schools, regardless of the students' financial status. Each public education entity would do this by maximizing the use of federal funds to cover costs.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the stark reality of food insecurity for many families in our country including those in our state. The reality was, and continues to be, that for many children school meals may be the only meals they get in a day. Between school years 2020 and 2022, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) was granted authority to implement waivers that provided universal free school meals to all students.

Since that policy ended in school year 2022-2023, we are already seeing the negative impact of reverting to a free and reduced school meals program model. The Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) found that in Rhode Island there **was a 22.6% decrease in school breakfast participation in school year 2022-2023 compared to 2021-2022.**¹ There was also a **10.2% decrease in school lunch participation** during the same time. This was higher than the national averages of 7.7% and 6%, in each respective program. Rhode Island served **1,588,211 fewer breakfast meals and 1,579,257 fewer lunch meals** in school year 2022-2023 compared to 2021-2022.

The children of Rhode Island need House Bill 7337 to **turn a temporary solution into a permanent state investment.**

¹ Crystal FitzSimons and Clarissa Hayes, "The Reach of School Breakfast and Lunch During the 2022-2023 School Year" (Food Research & Action Center, March 2024), <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Reach-Report-2024.pdf>.

Universal school meals are not just about providing food to children. Universal school meals are about **improving academic performance and attendance, promoting sociability** among students, **enhancing health outcomes**, boosting **student participation** in school meals, **addressing food security** and **preventing** students from feeling **stigmatized** for receiving free or reduced-price school meals or not being able to afford them.^{2,3,4,5,6} Universal school meals also have been found to provide cost-of living support to families with school-age children.⁷

Research analyzing Sweden's free school lunch long-term impact found that children who received these meals had **3% higher lifetime income, increased the likelihood of entering university, a 5% increase in maternal labor supply**, and greater effects and gains from the program were experienced by children from poor households.⁸

You simply cannot perform at your best if you are hungry.

The Governor's Proposed Budget for fiscal year 2025 aims to provide free school meals to about 6,500 students who are currently eligible for reduced-price school meals. This bill would complement that investment by **including funding for free school meals for all children**.

This legislation will enable Rhode Island to **join nine states** in our nation that have already implemented statewide universal school meals. California, Maine, Colorado, and Vermont are showing that the continuation of universal school meal programs beyond the pandemic is effective and crucial to the well-being of children and families. Yes, these universal school meals can seem like a lot of upfront cost, yet they can provide at least **\$21 billion in net benefits to society** when looking at the **benefits to health and economic**

² Patricia E. Jessiman et al., "A Qualitative Process Evaluation of Universal Free School Meal Provision in Two London Secondary Schools," *BMC Public Health* 23, no. 1 (February 9, 2023): 300, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-15082-3>.

³ Michael Nelson, "School Food Cost-Benefits: England," *Public Health Nutrition* 16, no. 6 (June 2013): 1006–11, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S136898001200420X>.

⁴ Juliana F. W. Cohen et al., "Implementation of Universal School Meals during COVID-19 and beyond: Challenges and Benefits for School Meals Programs in Maine," *Nutrients* 14, no. 19 (September 28, 2022): 4031, <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu14194031>.

⁵ Melanie K. Bean, Elizabeth L. Adams, and Joanna Buscemi, "Free Healthy School Meals for All as a Means to Advance Child Health Equity," *JAMA Pediatrics* 177, no. 8 (August 1, 2023): 753–54, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2023.1955>.

⁶ Lori A. Spruance et al., "Healthy School Meals for All in Utah," *Journal of School Health* 94, no. 5 (2024): 415–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13412>.

⁷ Patricia E. Jessiman et al., "A Qualitative Process Evaluation of Universal Free School Meal Provision in Two London Secondary Schools," *BMC Public Health* 23, no. 1 (February 9, 2023): 300, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-15082-3>.

⁸ Petter Lundborg, Dan-Olof Rooth, and Jesper Alex-Petersen, "Long-Term Effects of Childhood Nutrition: Evidence from a School Lunch Reform," *The Review of Economic Studies* 89, no. 2 (March 1, 2022): 876–908, <https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdab028>.

equity.⁹ Rhode Island can help lead a national movement as well as greatly benefit from its leadership.

House Bill 7337 is more than just another row in the state's budget. It's **an investment in the well-being, health, and potential of every child in Rhode Island**. School-based policies that ensure provision of nutrition and provide health-promoting resources and opportunities are crucial in **addressing health inequities and disparities among underserved populations**. As a person that received free school meals during my K-12 schooling, I sit before you all today as the result of that investment.

I respectfully urge your favorable consideration and passage of this important bill for the nourishment of the minds, bodies, and dreams of the children of Rhode Island of the present and future.

Thank you for your time.

Jocelyn Antonio

⁹ The Rockefeller Foundation and Center for Good Food Purchasing, "True Cost of Food: School Meals Case Study" (The Rockefeller Foundation, November 2021), <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/report/true-cost-of-food-school-meals-case-study/>.