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**Testimony Re: House Bill 7337 - Healthy School Meals for All**  
**House Finance Committee**  
**May 7, 2024**  
**Stephanie Geller, Deputy Director**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is part of the **Healthy School Meals for All Coalition**, and today we would like to voice our support for House Bill 7337, which requires that free breakfast and lunch be provided to all public elementary and secondary school students. I'd like to thank Representative Sanchez for sponsoring this bill and Representatives Morales, Stewart, Hull, Henries, Handy, and Slater for co-sponsoring.

**We would also like to thank Governor McKee for including a proposal to help children access free school meals in his FY 2025 budget, however, we do not feel this proposal goes far enough.** It does not include the funds needed to provide free and healthy school meals to all public school students, an investment that Rhode Islanders overwhelmingly support and that is needed to fight hunger and ensure that children are ready to learn.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the USDA provided funding for schools to offer meals free of charge to all students. In Rhode Island, schools offered free breakfast and lunch to all students during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, but the federal pandemic waiver ended in June 2022, and school meals are once again offered under a tiered system where students receive free, reduced-price, or full-price meals depending on their family's income. Schools are back to collecting school meal applications and incurring and trying to collect school meal debt from families with incomes that may be just over the income cutoff or that simply did not complete the required forms. This system creates stress and work for families and schools.

**Many other states have made Healthy School Meals for All permanent.** These states include our neighbors in Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont and farther afield, California, Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, and New Mexico. And many other states are considering legislation to make healthy meals free for all school children.

Why are so many states considering Healthy School Meals for All legislation – because it simply makes sense for our kids, our schools, and our state.

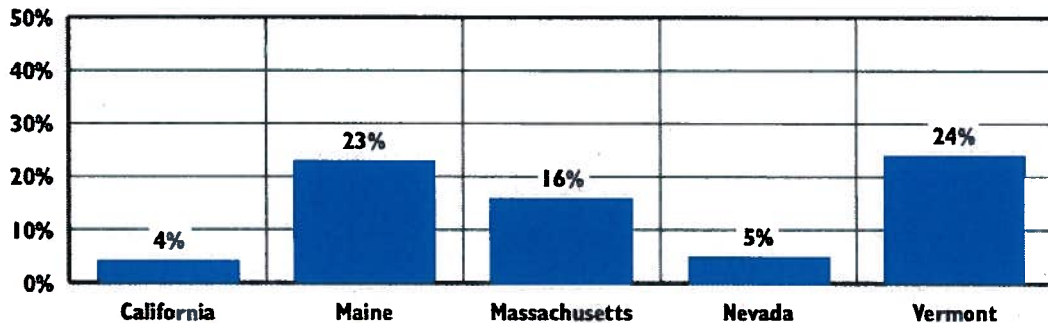
**Children cannot learn on an empty stomach.** According to the RI Life Index, a survey conducted by Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and Brown University, more than one-third (38%) of Rhode Island households with children are food insecure. Children who are hungry are more likely to have behavior, emotional, and academic problems and are more likely to be tardy or absent from school, be suspended, and repeat a grade.

**Providing school meals to all students will reduce stigma and improve equity.** Providing free meals to all students increases school meal participation by removing the stigma often associated with school meals.

**Providing school meals to all students would reduce administrative costs.** Schools spend a tremendous amount of time and effort collecting and processing school meal applications and collecting unpaid school meal debt. This bill would ease the administrative burden for schools and end the problem of unpaid school meal debt.



### **Percentage Change in Children Participating in School Lunch in Healthy School Meals for All States, 2018-2019 to 2022-2023 School Year**



Rhode Island KIDS COUNT has been encouraging schools to adopt policies and practices that improve school breakfast participation for a long time, including breakfast in the classroom, breakfast after the bell, universal school breakfast, and the Community Eligibility Provision. We have been focused on this issue because we know that access to healthy school meals supports academic success and improves attendance, behavior, and health, including reducing obesity rates.

**Rhode Island KIDS COUNT recommends that this bill, like House Bill 7400 (Caldwell) include provisions that will maximize federal funds available to support school meal programs and encourage models like breakfast in the classroom and grab-and-go breakfasts that allow more children to participate.**

Attached is a copy of the *2024 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook indicator on Children Participating in School Meals* that was just released yesterday and includes additional data and information this Committee might find helpful as you deliberate.

**We urge this committee to pass this bill so all children in Rhode Island have access to the nutritious school meals they need to learn and thrive.** Healthy School Meals for All is a key ingredient our state needs to improve educational outcomes. RIDE estimates that the fiscal impact of this bill to be \$38 million. We think our children and our schools are worth it.

Thank you for investing in the health and well-being of Rhode Island's children and for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

# Children Participating in School Meals

## DEFINITION

*Children participating in school meals* is the percentage of low-income children who participate in the School Breakfast or School Lunch Programs. Children are counted as low-income if they are eligible for and enrolled in the Free or Reduced-Price Breakfast and Lunch Program.

## SIGNIFICANCE

The School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program ensure that the nation's most vulnerable children have access to healthy meals.<sup>1</sup> During the 2022-2023 school year, 14.3 million children are breakfast at school daily and 28.1 million children participated in the school lunch program.<sup>2</sup> This represents a decrease of 1.2 million in breakfast participation and 1.8 million in lunch participation compared to the 2021-2022 school year.<sup>3</sup> The federally funded school meals programs offer nutritious meals, which together make up a large proportion of the daily dietary intake of participating children, support academic success, reduce food insecurity, and improve attendance, behavior, and health.<sup>4,5</sup> In Rhode Island, households with children face high levels of food insecurity, with more than 25% experiencing food insecurity in 2021.<sup>6</sup> Food-insecure families often do not have sufficient food to provide nutritious

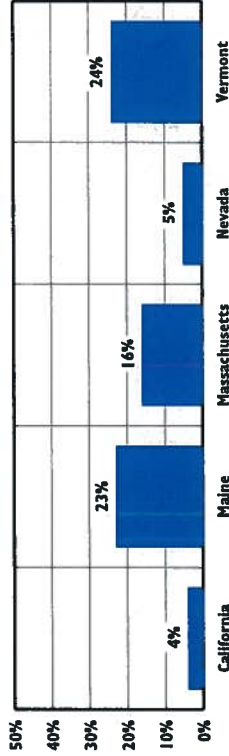
breakfasts every morning, and children in these families are at risk of falling behind their peers physically, cognitively, academically, emotionally, and socially. Children who are undernourished are more likely to have behavior, emotional, and academic problems, more likely to repeat a grade, and more likely to be suspended. Children experiencing hunger are also more likely to be tardy or absent from school.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

Rhode Island law requires that all public schools make breakfasts and lunches available to all students, including students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals based on their income (less than 130% of the federal poverty level for free meals and between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty level for reduced-price meals).<sup>10,11</sup> Nationally during the 2022-2023 school year 50.9 children participated in the School Breakfast Program for every 100 students who participated in the School Lunch Program.<sup>12</sup> Making breakfast part of the school day is a proven strategy for increasing breakfast participation, reducing stigma, and increasing convenience.<sup>13</sup>

Many low-income families lose access to school meals during the summer break, leading to childhood hunger. Summer EBT, which provides benefits for food purchases, helps bridge this gap and meet children's nutritional needs over the summer.<sup>14</sup>



## Percentage Change in Children Participating in School Lunch in Healthy School Meals for All States, 2018-2019 to 2022-2023 School Year



Source: Food Research and Action Center. (2024) The State of Healthy School Meals for All California, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont lead the way. Retrieved March 27, 2024, from [www.frac.org](http://www.frac.org).

★ In 2022-2023, five states—California, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont—implemented Healthy School Meals for All policies. In these states school lunch participation increased compared to pre-pandemic participation levels.<sup>15</sup> In Rhode Island, school lunch participation decreased by 7% compared to pre-pandemic participation levels.<sup>16</sup>

★ The federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) now allows schools and districts with 25% or more students identified as low-income, homeless or in foster care to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students, increasing access to meals and reducing administrative burdens.<sup>17</sup> In Rhode Island, in the 2022-2023 school year, 61% of eligible schools participated in CEP. Nationally, during the 2022-2023 school year, there was a significant increase in districts participating in CEP. A total of 40,235 schools participated, representing an increase of 6,935 schools, or 20.8%, from the previous school year.<sup>18</sup>

★ Rhode Island will join the newly launched nationwide Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) Program starting in the summer of 2024. Federal funds will allow eligible families to receive \$40 per month per school-age child on their EBT card to buy groceries.<sup>19</sup>

# Children Participating in School Meals

Table 41. Children Participating in School Meals, Rhode Island, October 2023

SCHOOL DISTRICT	OCTOBER 2023 ENROLLMENT	ESTIMATED AVERAGE DAILY PARTICIPATION IN BREAKFAST	% OF ALL CHILDREN PARTICIPATING IN BREAKFAST	ESTIMATED AVERAGE DAILY PARTICIPATION IN LUNCH	% OF ALL CHILDREN PARTICIPATING IN LUNCH
Barrington	3,305	36	1%	140	4%
Bristol Warren	2,763	129	5%	545	20%
Burrillville	2,028	98	5%	403	20%
Central Falls	2,714	1,367	50%	2,463	91%
Charlho	3,028	86	3%	301	10%
Covenry	4,156	304	7%	695	17%
Cranston	10,178	1,281	13%	2,639	26%
Cumberland	4,897	328	7%	603	12%
East Greenwich	2,511	28	1%	93	4%
East Providence	5,240	663	13%	1,546	30%
Exeter-West Greenwich	1,562	27	2%	113	7%
Foster	231	32	14%	38	16%
Foster-Glocester	1,339	39	3%	122	9%
Glocester	562	26	5%	45	8%
Jamestown	406	.	<1%	10	2%
Johnston	3,169	282	9%	792	25%
Lincoln	3,346	132	4%	494	15%
Little Compton	210	0	0%	12	6%
Middletown	1,942	125	6%	406	21%
Narragansett	1,061	23	2%	64	6%
New Shoreham	127	.	6%	16	13%
Newport	1,854	350	19%	788	43%
North Kingstown	3,776	232	6%	467	12%
North Providence	3,529	350	10%	937	27%
North Smithfield	1,652	32	2%	196	12%
Pawtucket	7,996	1,937	24%	3,725	47%
P Portsmouth	2,161	29	1%	159	7%
Providence	20,896	8,736	42%	9,833	47%
Scituate	1,179	19	2%	105	9%
Smithfield	2,402	73	3%	252	10%
South Kingstown	2,334	59	3%	204	9%
Tiverton	1,540	47	3%	231	15%
Warwick	7,857	384	5%	1,660	21%
West Warwick	3,623	401	11%	1,104	30%
Westerly	2,205	191	9%	430	20%
Woonsocket	5,584	1,616	29%	2,938	53%
Charter Schools	12,241	2,355	19%	3,985	33%
State-Operated Schools	1,797	151	8%	356	20%
UCAP	130	34	26%	91	70%
YouthBuild	148	26	18%	34	23%
Four Core Cities	37,190	13,656	37%	18,959	51%
Remainder of State	86,390	5,814	7%	15,610	18%
Rhode Island	137,896	22,036	16%	39,035	28%

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Education, Child Nutrition Programs, Office of Statewide Efficiencies, October 2023.

NA indicates that data on low-income students and their participation in school breakfast was not available because some or all schools in this district were using the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and therefore not collecting data on the incomes of students' families. During the 2022-2023 school year, Central Falls, Providence, some schools in Pawtucket and North Kingstown, Highlander Charter School, Providence Preparatory Charter School, Sheila C. "Skip" Nowell Leadership Academy, Southside Elementary Charter School, Rhode Island Nurses Institute Middle College Charter School, Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts, the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, and UCAP were using CEP.

\*Fewer than 10 students are in this category. Actual numbers are not shown to protect student confidentiality. These students are still counted in district totals and in the four core cities, remainder of the state, and state totals.

Charter schools include: Achievement First Rhode Island, Beacon Charter School, Blackstone Academy, Blackstone Valley Prep, A RI Mayoral Academy, Chartere Charter, Exed Academy Rhode Island, Highlander, International Charter, Kingston Hill Academy, Learning Community, Nuestro Mundo Public Charter, Paul Cuffee Charter School, Providence Preparatory Charter, Rhode Island Nurses Institute Middle College, Segue Institute for Learning, Sheila C. "Skip" Nowell Leadership Academy, Southside Charter School, The Greene School, The Hope Academy, Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts, Village Green Virtual, State-operated schools include William M. Davies Jr. Career & Technical High School, Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, and the Rhode Island School for the Deaf. UCAP is the Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program. YouthBuild is the YouthBuild Preparatory Academy. Data was not available for The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center.

Core cities are Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

(Sources and References are continued on page 188)