

# Committee on Children

## JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

**Bill No.:** SB-1217

**Title:** AN ACT PROVIDING SCHOOL MEALS TO ALL STUDENTS.

**Vote Date:** 2/18/2025

**Vote Action:** Joint Favorable Change of Reference to Appropriations

**PH Date:** 2/6/2025

**File No.:**

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### SPONSORS OF BILL:

Committee on Children

### CO-SPONSORS OF BILL:

Rep. Anthony L. Nolan, 39th Dist.

Rep. Nick Gauthier, 38th Dist.

Rep. Rebecca Martinez, 22nd Dist.

Rep. Aundre Bumgardner, 41st Dist.

Sen. Saud Anwar, 3rd Dist.

Sen. Julie Kushner, 24th Dist.

### REASONS FOR BILL:

SB 1217 would guarantee free school meals to all children throughout the state of Connecticut. This bill charges that no school board can charge for breakfast, lunch or other similar child feedings.

The State Board of Education would provide necessary funding for the schools by way of annual grants equal to the monetary requirement to run such program.

SB 1217 seeks to give all children equal access to school meals; allowing children to be fed and prepared for learning and in certain instances remove the stigmatization that may follow children who are unable to afford the provided school meals.

### RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

[The Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity Children Policy Analyst, Thomas Nuncio](#) supports this bill because it addresses the widespread challenge of food

insecurity. Free school meals increase positive outcomes for both education and development. It also decreases the stigma and makes students more likely to make use of these services. They recommend that language is added to the bill to decrease food waste such as doing food waste audits, adopting donation policies, and purchasing Connecticut grown produce.

[State of Connecticut Department of Education Commissioner, Charlene Tucker](#) suggests adding language to provide funding to the department so they can support this program. They agree that there is importance in providing children with nutritious meals but are concerned how they can fund that.

[City of Stamford Department of Health and Human Services Department Director, Jody Bishop-Pullan](#) supports this bill because it eases the financial burden on struggling families. It would be an investment in the future to fund school meals.

## **NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:**

[M.D., Yadira Acevedo](#): supports this bill as a family physician.

[Plainville Community Schools, Director Business and Operations, Sam Alderstein](#): supports this bill on the caveat that the bill include a guaranteed state reimbursement to cover the costs. They mention that many supports may not voice support due to this caveat not being included in the bill.

[Payroll/Treasury Specialist, Toni Akin](#): strongly supports this bill and also adds that offering free schools is important but also including a balanced and diverse set of options for students. While also adding that including expansive and nutritional meals should be the priority. They conclude that investing in our children's nutrition is an investment in our children's future.

[Life Focus Nutrition, LLC, CEO, Linda Arpino](#): supports this bill and anecdotally mentions that in their private practice they see many students who are insecure and do not want to be stigmatized for free meals and often just skip them.

[Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, RSM, Sister Nancy Audette](#): supports this bill and starts with how our state has billions in surplus while 1 in 8 children suffer from hunger. She continues that we provide free education services but not food – and that nutrition is the foundation for learning. She also includes data from CSDE and additional data from the ALICE Threshold of Financial Survival.

[MA, CAC, Stuart M. Baker](#): supports this bill – as a retired licensed alcohol and drug counselor they saw firsthand the effects of poor nutrition on children. They add that this bill will help to solve many of the effects that children incur while hungry.

[Erin Barthel](#): supports this bill, includes the cost it would have on her three children and adds that hot lunches provide the ability for children to try a variety of foods and not the same lunch every time.

[Odyssey Community School, Co-Principal, Michelle Bashaw](#): supports this bill includes data from CSDE and reports from ALICE. They add that this also goes beyond data and is a very real personal issue for families. They add their experience as a school principal and the change that occurred when free school meals were provided through the pandemic.

[Regional District 13, Foodservice Director, Mark Basil](#): supports this bill and includes data from CSDE and adds that universal school meals allows for increased stability for vendors – when schools have stable funding more communication with nutrition professionals can occur and increase offerings for students.

[Svetlana Kasem-Beg](#): supports this bill and as a single parent sees the promise and importance of this bill. Adds that they have struggled to provide healthy food for their children – and this bill would help.

[Wethersfield Public School, ML Teacher/Coordinator, 7-12, Patricia Berloe](#): supports this bill, cites CSDE and ALICE data. Adds how critical this bill would be for a vulnerable population, as a teacher they have seen students struggle with not eating.

[Danielle Bess](#): supports this bill and adds the importance of children being fed and adds that this removes the administrative burden schools have on tracking unpaid balances.

[Cheshire Public Schools, Director of Food & Nutrition, Erica Biagetti](#): emphasizes that the bill puts the sole funding responsibility on the board of education – this concerns her for nutrition programs and general district operations. She supports measures to review the process and the overall impact this will have on districts before providing schools meals that puts an excessive burden on schools.

[Beman Middle School, Volunteer, Brian Birdsey](#): supports this bill and sees daily the affects of food insecurity.

[Steering Committee Chair, CT For All, PreK12 Divisional VP, AFT-CT, President, New Haven Federation of Teachers, Leslie Blatteau](#): supports this bill and argues that as the wealthiest country in the world – Connecticut has an obligation to meet the needs of the children.

[Fairfield County's Community Foundation, President & CEO, Mendi Blue Paca](#): supports this bill and as the rise of food insecurity continues providing free schools meals removes financial barriers and the hindrance of learning. Adds that proper nutrition is important and funding is best spent when meeting children's basic needs.

[Wethersfield Public Schools, 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher, Palma Brandon](#): supports this bill and post-COVID free school meals has been a great equalizer in education in their view. They are concerned students will return to old bad habits and go hungry.

Jessica Brooks: supports this bill, and the access to healthy meals.

[National Farm to School Network, Policy Specialist, Policy Specialist](#): supports this bill and the importance of local food access in schools. They include data that supports this claim.

[41st District, Connecticut, State Representative, Aundré Bumgardner](#): supports this bill and adds they represent Groton Public Schools which has been a leader in healthy school meals.

They add that free school meals would remove stigma and the financial benefit of the bill. They end that Groton and Stonington demonstrate the importance of healthy school meals.

[Guilford Public Schools, Food Service Director, Janet Calbro](#) supports this bill and argues that they can see no more important cause than feeding children. She references President Truman's National School Lunch Act.

[CT Cradle to Career Coalition, Policy and Civic Engagement Director, Kathleen Callahan](#) supports this bill and argues that school meals or lack thereof affects youth disconnection and disengagement. They include data that supports their position and urges prioritizing policies that address food insecurity.

[M.D., Sandra Carbonari](#) supports this bill and includes that one in six children in Connecticut experience hunger. She includes affects that children feel when not eating and urges for the passage of the bill.

[MD, MPH, Michelle A. Cardona](#) supports this bill and reminds that hungry kids do not learn; she urges the passage of this bill.

[Teacher, Melissa Cardoso Guerrero](#) supports this bill.

[Plainville Community Schools, Director of Food and Nutrition Services, Ashley Carl, RDN](#) supports this bill she begins with data and anecdotal evidence of the affects that schools face when children do not receive free school meals – she urges passage of the bill.

[Anonymous](#) supports this bill because as a public-school teacher they see the struggle that some families go through trying to fill out the paperwork for their child to get free lunch. Providing free lunch for all kids would save these families from having to overcome barriers in paperwork like language barriers, insecure housing arrangements, and mental health issues.

[School Nutrition Association of Connecticut President, Diane Houlihan](#) supports this bill because it removes any barriers families may encounter in getting free nutritious meals. It also would simplify things for the schools implementing these programs to be able to provide free meals for all.

[Anonymous](#) supports this bill because they are a teacher and have seen what positive impacts free lunch can have, including allowing students to focus on learning.

[Corrinne Zavaglia](#) supports this bill because she is a dietitian and a mom who knows how impactful free school lunches can be.

[American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut policy counsel, Jess Zaccagnino](#) supports this bill because addressing food insecurity would help eliminate some racial inequities. Since there is no longer a federal program for free lunches, they believe the state should step in to fill the gaps like some other states already have.

[American Heart Association Connecticut Government Relations Director, Jim Williams](#) supports this bill because children who are provided with school lunch tend to get more health benefits than those who bring their own lunches. Also, there were kids who relied on

free lunches that were provided during the pandemic who no longer have access to those resources, so Connecticut needs to fill the gap.

[Beman Middle School Social Worker, Beth Weston Meekins](#) supports this bill because it ensures that every kid has access to a nutritious lunch. Even for families that can afford to provide lunch, it may not always be healthy, and parents may not be reliably sending their kids to school with lunch.

[Ashley Vitale](#) supports this bill because they are a manager in a public-school cafeteria who has seen many kids with negative balances in their accounts. They support this bill because this bill will ensure that no kid needs to worry about that or worry about their family not having enough money for them to eat.

[Middletown Public Schools Superintendent, Alberto Vazquez Matos](#) supports this bill because it will help many of the kids in their school district. Over half the kids in that district get some kind of state assistance. Tracking meal debts and payments wastes valuable time and resources, so making lunches free would resolve those issues.

[Patricia Tyaack](#) supports this bill because they are a cafeteria worker who has seen the need for a bill like this. They highlighted the fact that food is essential to students getting a good education, and the state already pays all other education costs.

[Dorothy Torres](#) supports this bill because food is necessary for kids to be properly educated. The effects of free school lunch will positively impact the state. There is a lot of need for a free lunch program in Connecticut.

[Odyssey Community School Co-Principal, Jessica Swann](#) supports this bill because it removes barriers for kids to get a healthy meal which in turn helps them succeed in school. Free lunch programs have also been known to improve school attendance.

[Clayton Stevenson](#) supports this bill because it removes barriers in getting access to free lunch and gets rid of the stigma against kids who do rely on free lunch.

[Cheshire Public Schools Superintendent, Jeff Solan](#) supports this bill only if that funding does not need to come out of the school's budget. While school lunch is very important and they support providing it for free, it would force them to eliminate up to twelve teaching positions.

[She Leads Justice Policy Director, Tonishia Signore](#) supports this bill because Connecticut is one of the wealthiest states in the country and yet 1 in 6 Connecticut children are food insecure. This bill would help resolve that.

[Sharon Shettleworth](#) supports this bill because in their role as a food service director they have seen many families that really need this bill. Families rack up debt to pay for lunches, and the kids are the ones who suffer.

[Wendy Sheil](#) supports this bill because as a secretary at a school, they have met many families who need this bill. It also removes the stigma against kids who qualify for free lunch.

[Hartford Foundation Senior Public Policy Officer, Chris Senecal](#) supports this bill because food insecurity is a problem that has been disproportionately affecting people of color in Connecticut. This Bill would help a lot of people in the communities this foundation serves.

[Yashira Santiago](#) supports this bill because they have seen firsthand the negative effects that hunger has on kids because they are a school nurse. The inability to have access to adequate food also contributes to chronic absenteeism and further creates a barrier in access to education.

[Trisha Rodriguez](#) supports this bill because families cannot keep up with rising costs, and providing free lunch makes an impact on a child's education.

[Groton Public Schools Student Nutrition Department Assistant Director, Kristina Roberge](#) supports this bill because it would get rid of the stigma against kids who rely on free lunch.

[Odyssey Community School Teacher, Anne Renzi](#) supports this bill because food is a necessary part of education, and some families receive no help because they are slightly over the income cutoff. Also, the stigma of getting free lunch prevents some kids from eating.

[Shannon Raider](#) supports this bill because they believe it is unfair to charge kids to eat at school when they are required to be there.

[Sharon Psychojos](#) supports this bill because it is important for children to not be hungry so they can pay attention in class.

[Julia Prescott](#) supports this bill because providing free meals will contribute to health equity and positively impact marginalized communities.

[Maraiah Popelelski-Tilley](#) supports this bill because it is Connecticut's duty to put their children first and prioritize the wellbeing of their communities. It would also relieve some of the financial strain on families.

[Kristin Pinkerton](#) supports this bill because it reduces the stigma against free lunches if everyone gets free lunch.

[FoodCorps Connecticut, Thalia Perez](#) supports this bill because schools are the best chance to address food insecurity problems with children.

[Leslie Perez](#) supports this bill because hunger has no place in a classroom, and it will help relieve some of the financial burden on families.

[Beman Middle School Teacher, Thomas Pattavina](#) supports this bill because hungry children cannot focus on classwork. Having free lunch for everyone will decrease stigma against free lunch. Free lunch will also improve attendance.

[Iris Ortiz Sanchez](#) supports this bill because students have improved educational outcomes if they have access to free healthy meals. This would also ease some of the financial burden on families.



[Town of Ashford Board of Education member, Anthony Paticchio](#) supports this bill because no student should be hungry at school. Other programs that only serve some students are both costly and inefficient, so an all-inclusive program is necessary.

[The Foodshed Network Food Justice Advocate, Ali Ghiorse](#) supports this bill because school meals are an investment in the community. The gap between what qualifies a family for free school meals and the income that people need to make ends meet is significant.

[Wolcott and Thomaston Public Schools Food Service Director, Jennifer Zarrilli](#) supports this bill because it ensures that all kids have access to nutritious meals. A lot of families that do not qualify for free lunch still cannot afford healthy meals for their kids.

[Wethersfield Public School teacher, Emily Woods](#) supports this bill because for some children, the school-provided meals are the only meals they get. Having meals provided at school benefits children and the community can see the positive effects of this.

[William Whitcomb](#) supports this bill because they believe all students should have access to free breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

[Sodexo Healthcare Wellness Director, MaryGrace Webb](#) supports this bill because it will help all students get the nutrition they need. Many students, even the ones that do bring their own lunch, are not getting adequate nutrition at home.

[Waterford Public School Secretary, Debra Virga](#) supports this bill because helping kids focus on school instead of on where their next meal is coming from is an investment in the future.

[Dr. Mary Beth Van Siclen](#) supports this bill because it helps prevent some of the dangers of chronic health issues with kids getting unhealthy lunches from home.

[Jennifer Toirac](#) supports this bill because they have been raising their granddaughter for the past twelve years, and they think this bill could help their future.

[Northeast Organic Farming Association of Connecticut Director of Advocacy, Kimberly Stoner](#) supports this bill because kids learn better if they are not hungry. Also, schools being able to count on income to pay for food allows them to support local farms and boosts the economic success of these local businesses.

[Melissa Stanley](#) supports this bill because the cost of living has gone up and families need something to ease the financial burden.

[Region 19 Board of Education member, Sarah Smith](#) supports this bill because it addresses food insecurity issues.

[Mark Simmons](#) supports this bill because it prioritizes education by making sure students are fed, which is just as essential to education as anything else the school provides.

[School Nutrition Associates of Connecticut Food Services Consultant, Jeff Sidewater](#) supports this bill because adequate nutrition is an essential part of learning, and many families do not have access to the resources they need to provide that.

[Dr. Julia Sherman](#) supports this bill because while teaching for 47 years, they have seen many kids struggle in school because of socio-economic issues.

[Cromwell Public Schools Food and Nutrition Coordinator, Sandra Shaw](#) supports this bill because food insecurity is a problem that affects one in six Connecticut children.

[Beman Middle School Innovation Coordinator, Erin Scholes](#) supports this bill because they believe providing nutritious meals to students is one of the most important things a school system can do.

[Jessica Rondash](#) supports this bill.

[The Northeast Organic Association of Connecticut Program Director, Sherlene Rodriguez](#) supports this bill because it has benefits in and out of the classroom. It helps set students up for success as well as economically supports local farms.

[Alison Rivera](#) supports this bill.

[Sister Maureen Reardon](#) supports this bill because students do not currently have equitable access to nutritious meals without this bill.

[Odyssey Community School Teacher, Jessica Provera](#) supports this bill because it gives students a better chance to succeed in school. It allows kids who would not normally have healthy meals at home the chance to be on an even playing field with their peers.

[Middletown Public Schools Social Worker, Kimberly Porras](#) supports this bill because food insecurity is a major stressor for students, and they deserve to be able to focus on their education instead.

[Regional 19 High School Food Service Worker, Emily Plume](#) supports this bill because kids are more likely to make use of school meal services if they are free, and students can focus more easily on their classes when they are not hungry.

[Connecticut Food Association President, Wayne Pesce](#) supports this bill because it promotes better health and wellbeing for students as well as eases the financial burden on their families. It has an overall positive impact on the community.

[Melissa Paul-Perez](#) supports this bill because cost of living has gone up and federal funding to fill the gaps between wages and cost of living has gone down. This bill will help relieve some of that financial burden.

[Mar-c Perazabaker](#) supports this bill because although nutrition is necessary for students to succeed in school, not all students have access to proper nutrition. The current programs in place are not sufficient to help every student.

[Plainville Adult and Continuing Education Coordinator Jill O'Brien](#) supports this bill because it provides equitable access to nutritious meals.



[Clare Nesperalla](#) supports this bill because they saw a lot of students benefit from free meals in twenty-seven years they have been teaching.

[The Bridge Academy Charter School Food Service Director, Tyler Moore](#) supports this bill because they have seen firsthand in their work the positive impacts free meals have on attendance and participation. It would also relieve financial burdens on families.

[Claudia Milne](#) supports this bill because hungry children cannot concentrate, and giving all students access to nutritious lunch levels the playing field.

[New Britain Public Schools Behavioral Health Clinician, Kerri Miller](#) supports this bill because the importance of having nutritious meals for children is felt by the entire state. There are benefits to providing those meals.

[The Students of Middletown High](#) support this bill because it helps families in need, it prevents kids from going hungry, and it allows kids access to a variety of healthy meals they would not ordinarily have access to.

[Sister Mary Ellen Messmer](#) supports this bill because there is data supporting the fact that free meals help students learn and benefit the community.

[Kristen Mercado](#) supports this bill because families are struggling financially right now, and this will ease some of that stress. It also will improve students' learning ability.

[Middletown Public Schools Junior Director of Food, Nutrition, and Wellness Services, Randall Mel](#) supports this bill because hunger has no place in a classroom. Many families who need support cannot get any because they are just about the threshold for free meals.

[Suzanne McIntyre](#) supports this bill because there are many families who are not able to provide their kids with nutritious meals throughout the day, so they need to get that while in school.

[Middletown Public Schools Special Education Teacher, Reed McFarland](#) supports this bill because hungry children cannot focus on their classes, and there is currently a stigma around those who do get free lunch.

[Catherine Mason](#) supports this bill because offering free school meals is an investment in the future due to its part in reducing stigma and providing students with a nutritious meal.

[Toffolon Elementary School Nurse, Rachel Martin](#) supports this bill because preventing hunger helps kids participate in the classroom and benefits their social-emotional health as well as their physical health.

[Connecticut American Academy of Pediatrics Chapter Advocacy Committee Chair, Molly Markowitz](#) supports this bill because nutritious meals are important for a child's health and development. This program can also improve mental health for parents because they will not have to worry as much about being able to provide nutritious meals for their children.

[Nuvance Health Patient Services Coordinator, Amanda Ludwig](#) supports this bill because it is an easy way for families to ensure that their kids are fed. There are barriers to other food programs such as food pantries because they are not often open outside of normal working hours.

[Victoria Livoti](#) supports this bill because it improves the performance of students and removes stigma for students who currently rely on free meals.

[Beman Middle school Nurse, Bianca Luciano](#) supports this bill because it will promote concentration and engagement in the classroom.

[Sister Anne Linehan](#) supports this bill because it will reduce stigma and level the playing field between students.

[Suffield Public Schools Food Service Director, Matthew Lillibridge](#) supports this bill because giving free meals to everyone does not single out the kids who rely on these meals. It has significantly lessened stress on families, and it resolved a lot of problems that were keeping students out of class.

[Kenny Leung](#) supports this bill.

[Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Agata Raszczyk-Lawska](#) supports this bill because access to healthy meals has a direct impact on a child's ability to learn.

[Sara Labowe](#) supports this bill because children need access to healthy meals to be able to concentrate, but many do not have access. The programs that are in place only serve a percentage of students who are impacted by this problem.

[Connecticut Citizen Action Group Member, Natasha Kuranko](#) supports this bill because families well with incomes well below the cost of living still somehow do not qualify for free meals.

[Regional School District 19 Special Education Teacher, Michael Koerner](#) supports this bill because they could see a positive difference in their students when free meals were offered and then a negative difference when these meals were no longer free.

[Odyssey Community School Student Support Services Coordinator, Lisa Kimyachi](#) supports this bill because it eliminates the stigma behind free meals, which can really help students who need free meals.

[CitySeed Director of Agriculture, Kaitlyn Kimball](#) supports this bill because it would help many students in need. It would also mean schools would no longer have to divert resources to keep track of debt.

[James Kelly](#) supports this bill because they have worked with many students who heavily rely on these meals.

[Julie Kelley](#) supports this bill because costs have increased while wages have not, and this program would help alleviate some of the financial burden on families.

[Maria Karas](#) supports this bill because healthy meals are an important tool in educating children. These meals do make an impact on students and their communities.

[Dr. Pranav Kapoor](#) supports this bill because there is data that strongly supports the idea that hunger has a negative impact on concentration and ability to learn. This program will also help them once they graduate because it promotes healthy eating habits.

[Odyssey Community School Paraeducator, Danielle Johnson](#) supports this bill because it provides a solution to the ongoing problem of child hunger.

[Beth Johnson](#) supports this bill because they believe that while nutrition in the home is vital, children also need to be given healthy meals outside the home as well.

[Connecticut Foodshare President & CEO, Jason Jakubowski](#) supports this bill because one in six children in Connecticut face food insecurity, and this is one of the best ways to address that.

#### **NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

[Superintendent, Regional School District No. 5, Jennifer P. Bryars](#) opposes this bill due to the financial burden that would fall onto the local school districts. He adds that if the allocated funding does not fully cover the cost local funds would be required to comply – he argues this is a unfunded mandate.

**Reported by: Julia Cabral / Christian Talarski**

**Date: 3/3/25**