

# Education Committee

## JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

**Bill No:** HB-5214 / [Bill Status](#) / [Public Hearing Testimony](#)

**Title:** AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL MEALS.

**Vote Date:** 2/27/2026

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

**PH Date:** 2/23/2026

**File No.:**

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### SPONSORS OF BILL:

Education Committee

### REASONS FOR BILL:

The reasons for this bill is for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2027, each eligible school district shall (1) provide school breakfasts to all students at no charge to such students, and school lunches to all students eligible for free or reduced priced lunch at no charge to such students, and (2) be eligible to receive a grant from the Department of Education for such free school breakfasts and school lunches.

### RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Charlene M. Russell-Tucker, Commissioner of the State Department of Education

The Department is very supportive of this proposal which provides implementation language for the provision of breakfast for all students in non-Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) districts participating in the federal school meal programs and lunch at no cost to students eligible for reduced price meals. They also thank the Governor for the inclusion of \$12,523,755 in the midterm budget, without which the Department would not have the funding to implement this proposal.

Christina D. Ghio, Acting Child Advocate at the Office of the Child Advocate ("OCA")

The OCA urges support of this bill which would provide free breakfast to all students and free lunch to certain eligible students. Connecticut's food insecurity rate for children is 17%. Of those who are food insecure, Feeding America estimates that 38% fall below the eligibility threshold for federal nutrition programs, meaning they aren't eligible for public benefits that would help them buy food. Food insecurity exists in all communities in Connecticut, from the southwest corner of the state (Western Connecticut Planning Region County), where the food insecurity rate for children is 12.2%, to the northeast corner (Northeastern Connecticut Planning Region County), where the food insecurity rate for children is 15.3%. They state that

hunger in children impacts health, cognitive functioning, school engagement, and behavior. Additionally, providing free meals to all students will reduce the stigma associated with the receipt of free meals.

The Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity (CWCSEO), CGA

The CWCSEO recommends the bill be strengthened in three ways:

1. Establish a “Food and Nutrition Special Fund” in the state budget: This would guarantee the sustainability of this program by allowing for future dedicated revenue sources, private contributions, and expanding this program to include free lunch for all students.
2. Require that 15% of state funds given to districts be spent purchasing from Connecticut Farmers: This could support local economies while also ensuring students have access to high quality, nutrient dense foods.
3. Require Schools to Adopt Food Waste-Reduction Measures: One example of this could be the adoption of an Offer versus Serve (OVS) model. The goal of the OVS model is to reduce food waste and allow students to choose the foods they want to eat. When students and cafeteria staff understand OVS, lunch lines move smoothly, allowing students to make the most of the lunch break and enjoy the foods that are served. Other food waste reduction strategies could include requiring the use of share tables, the establishment of in-school pantries with surplus food, donation of food to community food banks, and more.

**NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:**

Anonymous 38 Anonymous 38, Registered Nurse

This individual is an elementary school nurse in CT. Since September (105 school days), they've had 377 visits to the nurse's office for students without a snack. Snacks in the nurse's office come from the nursing budget so they are only able to keep cheaper items like crackers. Allowing this bill to go through for free breakfast will give their students the opportunity to stop in the cafeteria in the morning, have breakfast, and pack what they don't eat for a snack.

Anonymous 55 Anonymous 55

This individual asks why students must pay for lunch, but criminals get it for free in jail. They highlighted that tax dollars are being used to feed rapists and murderers but not students who are the future of this country. They stated that students are required to be in school for 1/3 of the day and shouldn't worry about if they will eat because their parents cannot afford to pay.

Anonymous, Anonymous Sophomore, Ledyard High School

This individual wants schools to provide students with free and nutritious meals. They shared that in their school, meals are terrible quality with low nutritional value for too much money. Their school will give out meals even when there's no money left in the students account, but the money still must be paid back. They believe students don't eat school meals because they're either disappointed in what's served, or they don't want to have debt on their accounts.

Meg Scata, Portland BOE Member

The Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE) supports the expansion of free school meals to all districts for breakfast, and lunch to students eligible for a free and reduced priced meal, with districts eligible to receive a grant from the State Department of Education. They highlighted that hunger inhibits a student's ability to learn and many families are facing

food insecurity. They stated that many districts are incurring up to a million dollars on uncollected lunch debt, which would be alleviated by this bill.

Janet B. Calabro, Food Service Director for Guilford Public Schools

This individual shared that President Harry S. Truman signed the National School Lunch Act on June 4, 1946, which started the first National School Lunch Program. The legislation came in response to claims that many American men had been rejected for WWII military service because of diet-related health problems. The federally assisted meal program was established as “a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation’s children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities”.

Leslie Blatteau, President, New Haven Federation of Teachers, Local 933 Divisional VP for PreK-12, AFT-CT Steering Committee Chair, CT For All

This individual represents 1800 certified educators in schools that strongly support HB-5214. They believe that income inequality is at its largest in generations and the ultra-wealthy continue to benefit from tax breaks at the federal level. They feel that food insecurity impacts far too many Connecticut residents and that providing no-cost breakfast K-12 is a commonsense solution that benefits students, families, and educators.

Mendi Blue Paca, President & CEO, Fairfield County’s Community Foundation

Given the rise in food insecurity across Connecticut, they believe it is essential that lunch be provided at no cost to every student. Eliminating stigma and ensuring all children are well-nourished is critical to their ability to learn, grow, and thrive. Research shows that when schools offer meals at no cost to all students there is less absenteeism and less bullying, and students are better able to focus, engage, and thrive academically.

Kyle Badorek, Graduate Social Work Student at Southern Connecticut State University

This individual shared that some of the children they’ve worked with told them that they liked school because it was the only nutritional meal that they had. They believe that providing universal free breakfast and expanding access to free lunch would reduce stigma, improve attendance, and promote educational equity. Access to consistent meals is not simply a nutrition issue; it is a mental health, academic success, and social justice issue.

Lukas Boxley, Ledyard High School Sophomore

This individual believes that when students go to school, they need something to fuel them and keep them from starving, and some students can’t afford the meals. From his own experience, he has seen students and some of his friends come to school without eating that struggle to focus, while others rely on school lunch as their main meal of the day.

Kathleen Callahan, Dir. of Policy & Civic Engagement Connecticut Cradle to Career Coalition

This individual is a resident of Stratford and cited a CT State Department of Education 2017 report that found chronic absenteeism rates for students eligible for free meals are more than three times higher than those for students who are not eligible. Hunger affects concentration, behavior, and attendance, all core drivers of long-term academic and workforce outcomes. Universal free school meals are a proven, practical strategy to reduce food insecurity, eliminate stigma, and remove administrative burdens for families and schools. For many students, school meals are the most consistent source of daily nutrition. Guaranteeing access ensures that no child’s ability to learn depends on household income or paperwork status.

Stephanie Ceglia, Registered Dietician

This individual stated that school meals have historically been used as income assistance, but recent economic conditions (e.g. housing prices, interest rates, inflation, cost of goods, cost of living) are leaving more families susceptible to food insecurity, regardless of income status. Financial security cannot be assumed at moderate, middle, and even upper income levels. Further, to earn more income, families have to work longer and harder making it difficult to ensure kids are eating before they leave for school. Schools are increasingly the most reliable place where children can count on a nutritious meal — sometimes the only reliable place.

Connecticut Voices for Children (CT Voices)

Even if a household is not experiencing food insecurity, expanding free school meal programs can help buffer against food insecurity by helping supplement families' food budget so that food and other resources go farther, something particularly important as more CT families struggle to meet their basic needs. As highlighted in a recent CT Voices report, food assistance programs, including free and reduced lunches, play a crucial role in poverty reduction, especially for children; in 2022 alone, over 50,000 CT residents were lifted out of poverty through such initiatives. The school lunch program alone lifted 9,960 residents out of poverty, including 5,710 children. They worry that there will be secondary impacts to children whose households are impacted by the new SNAP and Medicaid work requirements. The State uses direct certification for children enrolled in SNAP, Medicaid, or Temporary Family Assistance for free or reduced meals. Should these families be removed from these programs, their children may lose access to school meal benefits as well. Furthermore, when a student's household participates in SNAP or Medicaid, that participation counts toward a school or district's eligibility for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows schools to provide free meals to all students. If fewer school-age children are enrolled in SNAP or Medicaid, direct certification numbers will decline, lowering a school's CEP percentage. As a result, many schools could face higher costs to continue offering universal free meals.

Allison Cruz, Graduate Social Worker Student at Southern Connecticut State University

This individual stated that food is a human right that everyone should have access to. She believes that providing children a secured breakfast and lunch would be ideal for their development and academic success, lessening the burden if they don't have enough food at home for all three meals.

Alicia Daponte

This individual believes that providing free breakfast for all students is not just compassionate — it is smart. They believe that food insecurity leads to poorer health outcomes and higher long-term costs, including approximately \$1,800 per person each year in excess medical expenses. She believes that we'll pay for hunger one way or another and the question is whether we pay up front, with care and intention, or later, through crisis and consequence. Further, stigma is one of the biggest barriers to participation in school meal programs. Students know who qualifies and who does not. Many children skip breakfast altogether to avoid being singled out. Universal free breakfast removes that burden.

Sally Dastoli, Executive Director of Odyssey Charter School

Lisa Kimyachi, Director of Student Services, Odyssey Community School

These individuals stated that nearly all of their students would receive free meals if they attended their local district school, but because they attend a public charter school, they aren't afforded the same automatic access to free meals due to the funding and eligibility calculation. From an educational perspective, this bill is not simply about food — it is about access, equity, and student success. They measure their impact not only by test scores, but by engagement, attendance, and long-term outcomes. Nutrition is foundational to all those indicators.

Sasha Davis, Policy Analyst, School and State Finance Project

This individual believes that students and families continue to grapple with the lingering effects of inflation and rising costs. While inflation has slightly decreased from 2.7% to 2.4% since December 2025, food, energy, and housing costs have risen, ranging from 0.2% to 1.5%. This increase has placed additional pressure on many families and has led to more students facing food insecurity. While they support the bill's intent, they call for adoption of a permanent, free universal school meal program like in the states of CA, CO, MA, ME, and VT.

Jan DeAngelo, resident of Greenwich, CT

This individual requests the bill be amended to include free breakfast and lunch for all students. They acknowledge that there are families that "can afford to pay", but not every child will participate and with no stigma of being labeled "poor", all students can benefit as this would increase socialization between different groups. They believe that this bill will increase learning, health, and well-being while decreasing absenteeism and behavioral problems.

Joslyn DeLancey, Vice President Connecticut Education Association

Connecticut previously provided universal school meals with ARPA funding. This individual wants such a program made permanent to fulfill a basic human need, enabling children to fully participate in the classroom. Connecticut can learn from the experiences of other states in providing comprehensive, healthy, culturally-diverse foods.

Kate Dias, President Connecticut Education Association

The 2025-26 school year marks the 3rd consecutive school year where no-cost school meals have been reduced. Since 2020, the food insecure population in CT has increased by 152,600 people. One in six children are now food insecure in CT, with a 32.7% increase occurring between 2020-2023. With continued surges in food, housing, healthcare and utility costs, food insecurity is likely to impact children at even greater scales than the data shown from 2020-2023. This multi-pronged insecurity constitutes stressors on children's physical, mental and social health, impacting their ability to engage in the classroom and in their overall education.

Brian Donahue, Founder NOT JUST US, Social Worker

As a social worker for 32 years, this individual has been in the homes of low-income families. From his experience, school meals are often the only healthy meal, and in some situations, the only meals, students have during the day. Some families are not able to provide nutritious meals to their children on holidays, weekends, and during vacations. Families who suffer from hard economic times live in all towns and cities.

Daphne Edmond, Health Policy Graduate Student at the Yale School of Public Health

Universal access reduces stigma and increases participation. Research from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that 42% of parents whose children qualified for free or reduced-price meals reported that stigma reduced their child's likelihood of participating. This bill is a statewide investment in educational equity and public health. Approximately 122,970 CT children live in food-insecure households, making access to consistent school meals a critical health intervention. Students cannot perform at their full academic potential if they are hungry. Ensuring access to school breakfast and lunch improves attendance, supports academic achievement, reduces chronic disease risk, and advances equity across CT.

Karen Edwards MD MPH, resident of Stamford, CT

This individual highlighted the large gap between the \$41,795 income ceiling for free school meals for a family of 2 adults & 2 children (\$59,478 for reduced-cost meals) and the \$139,924 annual minimum income required for a family of 2 working adults & 2 children living in CT to meet basic needs. The provision of free school meals provides support for the many CT families who fall into this gap, decreases food insecurity, and improves health outcomes for their children. They believe that preventing children from experiencing acute hunger now and increasing academic achievement and life success for children as they grow into adulthood is an important role for state government. Families aren't charged for bus transportation to and from school, for textbooks or for team sports jerseys; so why charge them for an even more fundamental support to learning and school participation, namely freedom from hunger?

Daniel Fitzmaurice, Director of Advocacy United Way Connecticut

This individual shared that the latest ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) research demonstrates how the affordability crisis has spread across every zip code in Connecticut - at least 581,000 households are unable to afford basic necessities. Most items in a family's budget are fixed every week – housing costs cannot easily be reduced, childcare remains essential for parents to work, and transportation is a necessity. But food is a flexible budget item. ALICE families with children often buy fewer groceries, choose less healthy food, or skip meals altogether to afford their fixed costs. Expanding no cost breakfast for all students ensures that every child in school begins the day ready to learn, while relieving working families of a recurring expense that can quietly accumulate over the course of a year. Making reduced-price lunch no cost for eligible families closes a particularly harmful benefits gap for ALICE households. These are families who have already been identified under federal guidelines as struggling yet are still asked to contribute daily meal payments. Eliminating that cost streamlines administrative burden for schools, reduces meal debt, and supports parents who are working, but remain financially constrained.

Maryam Elahi J.D., M.A.L.D., L.H.D., President & CEO Community Foundation of Eastern CT

Implementing a no-cost school meals program would alleviate economic burdens on families, easing concerns about lunch debt and reducing household grocery expenses. In Connecticut, a family of 4 can earn no more than \$41,795 annual gross income to receive meals at no cost. However, according to the United Way of Connecticut, that same family's ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) Household Survival Budget is \$116,208, leaving a large gap in the ability to pay for necessities. 40% (580,520) of households in Connecticut are below the ALICE Threshold; providing school meals for all is one tool that assists these households economically and eases a family's stress. Providing only free breakfast, while limiting lunch based on income eligibility, maintains administrative burdens and stigma that universal meals are designed to eliminate. This individual believes that a fully universal

approach, free breakfast & free lunch for every student, is the clearest, most equitable solution.

Meg Hourigan, Co-founder of Connecticut Food Sovereignty Collective; Coordinator of Connecticut Food System Alliance; Policy Director of Hartford Food System

This individual believes that the state can afford universal school meals for children, but not the long-term, systemic harms of mass food insecurity and child hunger. Sound investments in child nutrition, including universal school breakfast and lunch with locally grown food, must be included in the state budget and food access and farm viability can be supported at the same time. They request that HB-5214 be revised to include universal lunch, include 15% of funds for CT local food purchasing, and also support corresponding legislation to completely fund school meals using a surtax on the highest income so everyone in CT eats well.

Timothy Gabriele, resident of North Haven, CT

This individual shared that during the two-year pandemic period in which meals were provided at no cost, it was a blessing to take the burden of meal prep off their plate. Not only the physical time relief, but the financial burden off grocery bills. It reduced the operational stress of thinking up and executing on healthy nut-free meals, one vegetarian and one not. It meant never having to encounter the frustrating software to constantly reload money onto student accounts for occasional school meals. It was peace of mind and a sigh of relief, knowing that the greater community was considering their children's needs while in the care of others. For families in a less privileged position, the free meal program was a lifesaving measure.

They believe it's an oversight that children are sent into a building for 8 hours every day with free transportation, instruction, mental & physical health services, sports equipment, textbooks, and Chromebooks, amongst other free resources, but the food being prepared for them comes at a supplemental cost. Their preference is for all school meals to be free to all students. They also believe this bill should be funded through the State of CT and not passed down to cash-strapped municipalities, who already bear the brunt of funding education in their communities.

Ali Ghiorse Executive Director, Executive Director, The Foodshed Network

This individual feels it is vital that all schools participating in the National School Lunch Program receive funding for food costs that the USDA does not reimburse. This investment is a solid first step toward universal no-cost lunch, which is proven to support students' capacity to focus, their feelings of safety in the cafeteria, and their overall well-being. Although Greenwich is often perceived as a wealthy enclave, it is an economically diverse community. Data shows that 27% of Greenwich residents live at or below the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) threshold. Additionally, the Greenwich living wage baseline is \$145,000 for a family of four. When you consider that the maximum income allowed for no-cost school meal eligibility for a family of four is \$41,795 (free lunch) and \$59,478 (reduced lunch), the gap is significant. Universal no-cost school meals help close this gap and truly make a difference for students, their families, and the school community.

Sharon Gifford, Mother and Stepmother

This individual works for a children's hospital full time and depends on school breakfast and lunch programs for her children.

Dr. Emily Hogeland, Pediatrician

In this individuals' work as a pediatrician, they often witness firsthand the detrimental effects of food insecurity. Providing free breakfast and expanding access to free lunch will help the children in our state be healthier and higher-performing students, which ultimately leads to higher educational attainment and higher income as adults. Her two children, who attend Connecticut public schools, both shared written testimony in support of the bill sharing that it's hard to eat breakfast before they go to school, and when they don't eat enough breakfast, it's hard to focus, learn, and play. They also support breakfast being provided for free because those who can't afford breakfast at home likely can't afford to pay at school. The children believe that if breakfasts are free at school, every kid, no matter how much money their parents make, would be able to have it.

Tida Infahsaeng, Senior Director of Advocacy and Partnerships at United Way Coastal and Western Connecticut (UWCWC)

Across UWCWC's 27-town region in Fairfield and Southern Litchfield Counties, 42% of households—over 336,000—are ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) and struggle to make ends meet. During COVID, when school meals were free to all students, demand far exceeded typical free and reduced-price participation, highlighting the need for no-cost meals for ALICE families just above federal eligibility. HB 5214 begins to address that gap, easing financial pressure on working families while supporting student health and readiness to learn. The income cap for reduced-price meals is \$57,700 for a family of four, while the ALICE survival threshold in Fairfield County is \$127,000. According to Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap, universal no-cost school meals would save families approximately \$147 per student per month, or \$1,321 over a school year. No-cost meals help children avoid skipping meals, reduce unpaid meal debt and stigma, support academic performance and health, provide financial relief to families, promote equity, streamline school operations, and increase federal reimbursements. While we are grateful for HB 5214, it overlooks the largest, most diverse, and highest-need schools and districts operating the USDA's Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), including Bridgeport, Danbury, Norwalk, and Stamford. CEP allows high-need schools to offer no-cost meals to all students and receive the highest level of federal cost-sharing, and through partnership and targeted resources, these schools can sustain their programs while advancing continuous quality improvement in the state's most robust meal initiatives.

As we plan long-term strategies for student success, we look forward to building upon this year's investment to expand no-cost school meals for all students. Providing consistent access to nutritious meals supports learning, helps families manage essential expenses, and promotes equity across Connecticut. HB 5214 is an important first step toward a healthier, more equitable state where no child's success is limited by economic circumstances.

Divya Jagadeesh, Graduate Student at the Yale School of Public Health

This individual stated that school-based nutrition programs are among the most effective population-level interventions to address food insecurity. Research demonstrates that children who regularly participate in school meal programs consume higher-quality diets, and have a greater intake of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Reliable access also supports physical health, cognitive development, and long-term well-being. Because schools provide a stable and consistent setting for most children, school meals can buffer them from some of the negative effects of household-level food insecurity.



J. McBride & C. Senecal, Public Policy Team, Greater Hartford Gives Foundation

The Foundation believes HB-5214 strikes a reasonable balance given the many pressures on the budget, and it allows time to learn from and assess the impact of this substantial investment. They also believe it's important to consider how meals will be delivered to students and referenced a study which examined different models of providing Breakfast After the Bell (BATB) to see if rates of student participation could be improved. These models included Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC); Grab-and-Go (GG); and Second Chance Breakfast (SCB). All these initiatives seek to integrate breakfast into the school day. BIC provides students breakfast at their desks during the first 15 minutes of class, typically while morning announcements and attendance is taken. GG is a flexible model and offers students the opportunity to pick up breakfast on the way to class, either from the cafeteria, or in coolers or carts located in the hallways. SCB serves breakfast in the cafeteria or via kiosks or carts in the hallways between class periods. The evidence suggests BATB approaches have the potential to increase school breakfast participation, which can lead to improvements in students' nutrition through consumption and diet quality, and improvements in students' classroom behavior.

Bryte Johnson, CT Govt. Relations Director, American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network

This individual believes that children with access to nutritious food are more likely to develop healthy eating habits they can continue to use into adulthood, which may reduce their cancer risk in adulthood. A healthy eating pattern is associated with a reduced risk of cancer in adults. States that have enacted legislation and secured funding to permanently pay for universal free school meals for all students include CA, ME, VT, CO, MN, MI and NM. CT and MA enacted legislation to fund universal free school meals for only the 2022–2023 school year and are working to pass universal free school meals for additional school years. MD, OR, VA, and WA have enacted laws to require schools to participate in the CEP increasing access to free school meals to students from household incomes above 199% or 300% of the federal poverty line.

Allison Kallberg, Public Policy Coordinator, Connecticut Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

This individual is a registered dietician and believes that free and reduced cost school meals are a worthwhile investment in communities. They stated that every \$1 spent on school meals offers over \$2 ROI through improvements in health and economic wellbeing. Furthermore, investment in school meals creates jobs and brings revenue to businesses in the state.

Maria Karas, Dietetic Assistant

School meals are incredibly important and hungry kids can't learn. I urge you to support HB5214 which would directly benefit many Connecticut students and families.

Rachel Khanna, Selectwoman of the Town of Greenwich, former State Rep. 149th district

In Greenwich public schools, where roughly 20% of students participate in the free and reduced lunch program, there is an urgent need for initiatives to support free school meals. There are many households that aren't eligible for income-based assistance, yet are still struggling, for whom a free meal can make a tremendous difference.

Myra Klockenbrink, Greenwich parent

In this individual's town, 27% of residents live at or below the ALICE threshold and a family of four needs \$145,000 to meet basic expenses. They feel that many families quietly struggle. Connecticut's food insecurity rate is now 14.3% and universal school meals will reduce stigma, ease family stress, and ensure every child is nourished and ready to learn.

Stephanie Knight, Food Services Director Willington Public Schools

As a food service worker for the past 18 years and director for 6 of those years, this individual knows firsthand the importance of free school meals for all. They've seen students bullied for being a "free kid". In many households, both parents work just to get by. Many have to leave early in the morning, oftentimes neglecting to feed their children before school.

Stephania Korenovsky, Graduate Student of Public Health at Yale University

This individual was a free lunch student and later a reduced-price lunch student when their family was making too much to qualify, even though they were still low income. When districts provided free meals to all students during covid-19, it made an enormous difference for families like theirs. Even today, they have family members in the East Haven Public School system who depend on these meals. For many students, school meals are essential for daily stability.

Reverend Teran E. Loeppke, Executive Director of the Collaborative Center for Justice

This individual believes that every school in CT should be a hunger-free zone. They support the Committee's and Governor's proposal and also strongly support the prioritization of funds in the 2027 state budget adjustments to fund these meals equitably across all school districts. They cite the importance of all schools that participate in the National School Lunch program to get funding for the cost of food that the USDA does not reimburse.

Katie Longley, resident of Belchertown, Massachusetts

Although this individual is not a CT resident, CT is where they work, contribute to the economy, and spend much of their week. They have direct experience with a community that currently offers universal free school meals, witnessing how universal meals function as basic learning infrastructure by quietly removing barriers that otherwise show up as absenteeism, distraction, stress, and stigma. Universal meals increase participation and normalize eating at school. The Massachusetts state report shows that after universal meals became permanent, participation stayed high and increased significantly compared with the pre-universal period with 12.2 million more lunches and 9 million more breakfasts than school year 2018 to 2019 even while statewide enrollment declined. The biggest participation gains were among students previously categorized as paid indicating universal meals reach families who otherwise opt out.

Molly Markowitz, MD, FAAP Chair Advocacy Committee CT-American Academy of Pediatrics

The American Academy of Pediatrics advocates for expanding access to nutritional assistance programs to ensure that children experience the benefits of healthy eating such as improved brain development, boosted immunity, strong bones and muscles, and normal growth. Children who experience food insecurity, defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food or nutritious food, are more likely to become ill, develop chronic diseases, and have nutritional deficiencies. They are also more likely to become hospitalized and have increased medical costs. Children who experience hunger have impaired learning in school, are at increased risk of developmental delays and are more likely to experience emotional and behavioral challenges. Hunger is also harmful to parents. When families experience food

insecurity, parents are chronically stressed and are at increased risk of developing mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression.

Kate Mazzotta, The Connecticut Children with Incarcerated Parents Initiative

This individual believes the passage of this bill is imperative to the survival of children with incarcerated parents. For youth with formerly incarcerated parents, rates of food insecurity are four times higher than for peers who never experienced parental incarceration. Having to pay and qualify for free or reduced-price school meals can create barriers for many students to access healthy meals and nutrition.

Iris Ortiz Sanchez, resident of Wethersfield, CT

This individual feels this is a positive step forward, but to truly address child hunger, eliminate stigmas, and make sure every student is fed and ready to learn, Connecticut must provide free school breakfast and lunch to students.

Sara Parker McKernan, Policy Advocate-New Haven Legal Assistance

Encouraging healthy eating through this proposal will benefit high school and middle school students who may find it difficult to eat at home in the earliest hours before school. They may be the most apt to be consistently hungry, but also the most worried about the stigma of receiving free or reduced-price meals. Additionally, children from families who may be struggling financially but may earn over the very low eligibility level to qualify for free or reduced-price meals (130% to 185% of the federal poverty level which in 2026, is between \$42,900 and \$61,050 for a family of four). Further, children with eating disorders or social anxiety may be more likely to eat when everyone is included. Lastly, those children and their families who are anxious about school meal debt will benefit, including those receiving reduced-price meals for whom the copays for each meal can create a significant barrier to participation.

Anthony Paticchio, resident of Ashford, CT

While this individual supports this bill, they view it as falling short of what must be the ultimate goal of providing universal free school breakfast and lunch to all students.

Ann Percival, resident of Middletown, CT, retired public school teacher

This individual believes that it's vital that all children arrive in their classrooms ready to learn because they have eaten a healthy meal. They stated that this bill encourages towns and cities to offer these meals without penalty to their taxpayers.

Maraiah Popeleski-Tilley, RDN CT Farm to School Collaborative CoChair

Districts across the state are reimagining the school food experience through meals and are implementing "harvest of the month" programs, like Plainville Community Schools, who introduced their students to candy cane beets in December from Vibrant Farm in Bantam CT. Mansfield Public Schools try to focus on scratch cooking so that they are better aware of all ingredients, can reflect and celebrate students' cultures, reduce packaging waste, enable sourcing from local farms, and expand students' palates. Some meals served in Mansfield this year include shawarma style chicken & rice, plant based chili with baked tortilla chips, and CT maple french toast bake made with local syrup. They also bake their own cornbread and make all of their own dressings and sauces including BBQ, Ranch, and bechamel based cheese sauce for mac and cheese. Mansfield partners with local farms to bring local food to the lunch trays, including hyper local bulk milk, as well as a wide variety of vegetables and

fruits. They take great pride in the menus they serve students and strive to provide the best nutrition for each young learner. These are the meals and experiences that are possible when more resources go into school meal programs. Not only is the playing field leveled for all students, much like library books, school field trips, and a bus ride to school, but increased participation in those meals brings in more revenue for the school nutrition department to support more choice, fresher local foods, and enhancements to the cafeteria experience. Supporting school meals through free breakfasts and free lunch for reduced price eligible students is also a driver in the economic success of our local businesses, especially farmers. When school food services can count on income for the meals, they can buy more locally produced foods. It's a virtuous cycle and one that pays dividends in school performance and student well-being. It creates the conditions conducive to later success and lifelong health while also improving the overall food system. Providing schools with the resources to increase access to meals and be able to offer fresh, nourishing foods is a win for youth, schools, farmers, and communities.

Eric Protulis, Executive Director EASTCONN

This individual believes that this is a common-sense, practical step toward making sure kids aren't sitting in class hungry. Breakfast is often the most important—and sometimes the only—healthy meal students get.

Sharon Psychojos, Board Member Waste Free Greenwich

This individual supports HB5214 and provided a link in their testimony.

Nina Ruckes, Registered Dietitian

This individual supports school meals for all because hungry children cannot learn. Healthy school lunches provide a substantial part of a child's nutrition needs, help parents who have limited resources, and are important to help children succeed in school.

Kimberly Sandor, MSN, RN, FNP Executive Director, CT Nurses Association

This individual shared that during early childhood, childhood and adolescence, nutrition shapes physical growth, immune strength, organ development, and lifelong health. Good food is foundational to healthy brain and body development. During childhood and adolescence, periods of rapid brain and body growth, a healthy diet ensures adequate intake of protein, iron, healthy fats, vitamins, and minerals that supports the body to grow, the brain to work, and the body and the brain to work together. Nutrition impacts cognitive function, memory, problem-solving, and emotional regulation. Without consistent access to nutritious meals, children face higher risks of chronic health conditions, weakened immune systems, developmental delays, and impaired cognitive and motor function. Skipping meals is linked to increased anxiety and depression, and persistent hunger creates toxic stress that disrupts healthy growth and has lasting consequences for both physical and mental health. High calorie and nutrient poor foods are often substituted for healthy foods because they are easily accessible and low cost.

Meg Scata, Portland BOE Member

Connecticut Association of Boards of Education supports HB 5214, which provides for the expansion of free school meals to all districts for breakfast, and lunch to students eligible for a free and reduced priced meal, with districts eligible to receive a grant from the state Department of Education. They stated that hunger inhibits a student's ability to learn, many

families are facing food insecurity, and many districts are incurring thousands of dollars to a million dollars on uncollected lunch debt, which would be alleviated by this bill.

Sharon Shettleworth, Food Service Director

This individual states that meal debt is higher than ever and students are hungry and not able to focus on their school work. They are embarrassed to email and call parents who owe money and urge bill passage because so many families are suffering financially.

Laura Shulman Cordeira, Director of Community Health and Wellness at RVNAhealth

This individual would like HB-5214 strengthened by expanding free lunch to all students and encourages CT to join states like CA, CO, ME, MI, MN, NM, and VT by ensuring CT's children are fed, healthy, and prepared to learn. She believes that when children have consistent access to healthy food, they are better able to focus, grow, and succeed. Additionally, both public and philanthropic education funding are more effective when students' basic needs are met.

Jeff Sidewater, School Nutr. Prog. Consultant

This individual shared that implementation of free school breakfast for all students can: 1.) Remove the stigma associated with "poverty programs" in our schools. 2.) Improve academic outcomes, as nourished students show higher concentration and better test scores. 3.) Support working families who are currently caught in the "hunger gap." 4.) Reduce meal debt that drains funds from other educational programs and services. While current programs are a start, the "reduced-price" category often creates a financial burden for families who earn just above the poverty line but still struggle with CT's high cost of living. Neighboring states of NY, MA, ME, and VT found ways to implement Healthy School Meals for All, and it is time for CT to join them.

Tonishia Signore Policy Director, She Leads Justice (SLJ)

This individual wants to convey SLJ's strong support for the Governor's proposal to provide breakfast at no cost to all students, and to eliminate the cost burden for students currently eligible for reduced-price lunch. They also urge the Committee to secure the necessary funding to implement these policies in every district across the state. Additionally, eliminating the reduced-priced lunch co-pay will immediately help families across the state who are working, but still struggling to make ends meet. The term "school lunch debt" should simply not exist.

The latest ALICE Report from the United Way of CT shows the rate of households living below the ALICE threshold in our state is surging. These are families who are working hard, often multiple jobs, and still unable to afford the basics; they make up about 40% of families in our state. The ALICE survival outlines that a family of four must make at least \$116,208 to afford the basics- this includes no extras and no additional opportunities for children to thrive. To qualify for no-cost school meals, a family must earn less than \$41,795. These numbers demonstrate a huge gap in eligibility, and implementing universal breakfast and lunch for all students in CT helps to close this gap. School districts with universal school meals show improved health outcomes, increased attendance rates, and better academic scores. They also gain the ability to directly impact food insecurity in their communities.

Titus Streckfuss, Sophomore at Ledyard High School

According to the Chicago Tribune, "The food in schools is somewhat inedible and lacks essential nutritional value. All of the food is mainly processed and has many chemicals in it." This occurs in many high schools around the country, including Ledyard High School. They all serve highly processed foods with little to no protein in their meals. This is particularly concerning for athletes like this individual. To perform well in sports after school and maintain a healthy body, they need consistent access to nutritious food, especially protein, to build and maintain healthy muscle. Although this issue affects all students in school, it is particularly detrimental to athletes who require adequate nutrition for training, recovery, and muscle development. However, what's worse than no nutrition in school lunches is no lunch at all.

Rebecca Toms, resident of Milford, CT

This individual believes that CT must provide free school breakfast and lunch to all students. Food is essential for students to learn. As the number of food insecure children in CT continues to rise, we must meet that need in our schools. We want our students engaged and thriving. We want them at school alert, focused, and ready to learn. Ensuring children are well fed does this, removing the distraction of food insecurity, ensuring higher physical health outcomes that help them to stay in the classroom, and ensuring they focus on the tasks at hand.

Becky Tyrrell, Food Service Director for EdAdvance, the Regional Education Service Center

This individual oversees meal service in 10 different school districts in Litchfield County. After the pandemic, when school meals went from free to paid, it was heartbreaking for them to watch meals counts decline and students go without due to the stigma. Students who qualified for free and reduced meals stopped getting meals. Some didn't know their status, and others didn't want to get in the lunch line for fear their classmates might think they needed a free meal. There is only one way to reduce the stigma - feed all children, level the playing field.

Mario Volpe Policy & Advocacy Manager, CT Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV)

Access to consistent nutrition is one of the most immediate and critical needs facing many of the families they serve. Survivors of domestic violence frequently experience economic abuse, a form of control where abusers restrict access to income, employment, or necessities. Survivors fleeing abuse must leave homes quickly, often with limited financial security and threats to their food security during periods of transition. Providing universal free breakfast to all students and free lunch to those who qualify removes a significant daily burden for survivor parents who may be managing court proceedings, employment disruptions, and their own trauma recovery. Legislation such as HB 5214 allows survivors who are rebuilding their lives to know that their child will have consistent access to meals, regardless of their situation at home. By making this policy universal, the stigma associated with free meal participation is removed, which will be particularly helpful for children attempting to adjust after leaving an abusive household, as well as protecting their privacy.

Jim Williams, American Heart Association Government Relations Director- CT

This individual stated that federal child nutrition waivers passed during the pandemic decreased child hunger and poverty, allowing all students to have access to free school meals. That funding expired and now children who depend on it are going hungry again. Numerous states are stepping up to fill the gap and ensure that all children, regardless of family income, can obtain healthy meals throughout the year and have the best chance to learn and thrive in school and urge CT to be next! They suggested a creation of a sugary

drink tax to pay for Healthy School Meals For All. Data was cited throughout the testimony, but website & hyperlinks are inactive.

Samantha Wilson, Child Nutrition Program Director-New London Public Schools

She believes that this bill recognizes a simple truth: Universal free breakfast is a foundation for academic success, equity, and opportunity. When every student eats together, no child is labeled, no family is judged, and dignity is preserved. We will pay for hunger one way or another. The question is whether we pay up front, with care and intention, or later, through crisis and consequence.

Janée Woods Weber Executive Director, She Leads Justice

As a child, this individual was a public-school student who received free school meals. Every day at her elementary school, she was fed and ready to learn because legislators decided that her health, education, and future were worthy of investment. She is grateful that this investment has paid off across her lifetime. When she was in middle school, she moved to a new school where she did not have access to a no-cost meal so there were days when she did not eat lunch. No student in CT should ever experience that.

Jess Zaccagnino, Policy Counsel American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-CT)

The ACLU-CT supports HB-5214, but stated that it must be amended to provide free school lunches to all children, not just those who qualify for reduced-price meals.

Jennifer Zarrilli, MS, RDN, CDN Director of Food Services Wolcott and Thomaston Schools

Universal breakfast and expanded lunch access increases participation and stabilizes federal reimbursement revenue, reduces administrative costs tied to eligibility processing and debt collection, improves economies of scale lowering per-meal production costs and protects Boards of Education from absorbing nutrition program deficits. Increased participation also allows districts to reinvest in local food purchasing and Connecticut farm partnerships, expanded scratch cooking, lower-sugar breakfast options, and increased access for all to fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and dairy. Stable funding shifts the focus from debt management to quality improvement.

As a pediatric registered dietician, this individual has treated the downstream effects of poor nutrition — obesity, type 2 diabetes, and preventable chronic disease. Regular exposure to balanced school meals shapes taste preferences, dietary patterns, and long-term health outcomes. We cannot treat our way out of chronic disease; we must prevent it. This individual's son, who has always been a selective eater, expanded his food repertoire during the period of universal free meals by eating more fruits, vegetables, dairy, and whole grains. He requested whole grain bagels and other foods at home and talked about the health benefits of salad and cabbage that he tried at school. School breakfast even motivates him to get to school on time.

**NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

Anonymous, Anonymous Sophomore, Ledyard High School

This individual is in opposition of this bill because it doesn't make school lunches healthier for the students. The bill doesn't say anything about how unhealthy the lunches can be, and how bad they are for the children. This is important to them because according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 in every 5 students that attend public school are

considered obese, which can lead to high risk of diabetes and heart disease. They have a lot of family members who have diabetes, and they've seen the struggles they face daily. They've also seen classmates be made fun of or bullied for their appearance.

Dr. Linda Dalessio

This individual believes this bill is an avenue for fraud, at taxpayer expense. They believe the food in schools is disgusting, lacks nutrition, is very high in sugar, fat, and carbohydrates, and is a reason for obesity and mental health problems. They do not feel that taxpayers should be responsible to feed toxic food to every child that enters school.

Selina Rifkin

This individual believes this is overreach in the name of compassion. Their concern is that we have no say in the contractor who will do this, and no reason to think they would do anything but waste tax dollars providing the least nutritious fare possible.

**NATURE AND SOURCES OF GENERAL COMMENTS:**

Linda Koe, resident of Stamford, CT

This individual believes the bill falls short of what is needed to ensure all students are getting the nutritious meals they need to succeed in the classroom. To truly address child hunger, eliminate stigmas, and make sure every student is fed and ready to learn, CT must provide free school breakfast and lunch to all students.

Jessica King, Public School Educator and member of the Connecticut Education Association

This individual's written testimony is in support of increasing the base ECS foundation amount that hasn't been substantively changed since 2013. Their belief in this increase lies in the need to account for many factors including but not limited to inflation and disproportionate current funding allocations that impact children's quality of education depending on their zip code.

Willie Medina, Bridgeport Board of Education Member

This individual made numerous biblical and religious references throughout their written testimony to highlight the necessity of prioritization, protection, and education of children. While they believe many proposed bills reflect thoughtful efforts to address the needs of students and teachers, they don't think many would be necessary if the ECS formula reflected inflation and included a true cost-of-living adjustment for the past 13 years. They stated that in his meetings with partners from across the state, education consistently rises to the top of every priority list.

**Reported by: Emily Swiatek**

**Date: 4/8/26**