

Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No: HB-5537 / [Bill Status](#) / [Public Hearing Testimony](#)

AN ACT IMPOSING A TAX ON CERTAIN SWEETENED BEVERAGES,
SYRUPS AND POWDERS AND DEDICATING THE REVENUE GENERATED
Title: TO A UNIVERSAL FREE SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM.

Vote Date: 3/30/2026

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 3/16/2026

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Finance, Revenue, & Bonding Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

This bill seeks to impose a tax on certain sweetened beverages, syrups, and powders and dedicate the revenue generated to a universal free school meals program to reimburse local and regional boards of education for the provision of free school breakfasts and lunches to all public-school students. Through this legislation, the Committee hopes to encourage healthier eating habits amongst the population while providing an additional source of revenue to make school meals accessible to all public-school students.

SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE: LCO NO. 3660

This substitute language creates a working group to study how to fund a universal free school meals program. It looks at costs, potential funding sources (like a sugary drink tax), and how the program would work. The group will report recommendations to the legislature by January 2027.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Charlene M. Russell – Tucker, Commissioner, Dept. of Education

The Commissioner and SDE offer several comments on the bill. They suggest exempting local and regional boards of education from the drink tax to allow the sale of the beverages at sporting events and to keep non-dairy milk alternatives at a lower price for students with disabilities or allergies who need them. Additionally, the Commissioner discusses language changes that the bill needs if it seeks to supplement changes in the federal USDA reimbursements for school meals. She testifies that the

training and technical assistance that the universal program would require are not included in the Governor's budget, and therefore need to be added. Moreover, she says that, "It is important to note that other states implementing universal breakfast and lunch at no cost require schools to 'maximize the federal reimbursement.' This equates to requiring those schools with 25 percent or higher student populations eligible for free school meals to participate in the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) or similar federal provisions to minimize the additional costs to states. Any legislation along the same lines in Connecticut should include the same requirement."

Amy Porter, Commissioner, Dept. of Aging & Disability Services (ADS)

The Commissioner and ADS understand the intent of the bill, but they express concerns about the potential impact of the proposed tax on the entrepreneurs who work with ADS. They reference the federal Randolph-Sheppard Act that gives priority for the operation of vending facilities on federal property to vendors who are legally blind. In CT, their Business Enterprise Program (BEP) supports 16 entrepreneurs who are blind, and they manage concession stands, cafeterias, micro markets, food service partnerships, and other vending routes. BEP is financially self-sustained through commission revenue from third-party vendors such as PepsiCo. ADS would like to work with the Committee to discuss the bill and protect these vendors.

Christian Duborg, Nutrition Policy Analyst, Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity, & Opportunity

The Commission lends its support for the bill, emphasizing that universal free school meals is a proven way to fight food insecurity. Mr. Duborg cites a study from the US Department of Agriculture that showed a 9.8% decrease in food insufficiency in states with free school meals compared to those without. Additionally, they state that food insecurity is a critical component of the affordability crisis because food is one of the largest household expenses. They highlight how sugar-sweetened beverage taxes receive support from communities and amongst parents when the policy is paired with a clear commitment to use the revenue to support the establishment of a free school meal program. Moreover, they argue that this support reflects the consensus that improvements to child nutrition play a vital role in strengthening students' academic performance and overall wellbeing.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Anne Hughes, State Representative. 125th Dist., Connecticut General Assembly

Rep. Hughes supports this bill because it is an evidence-based solution for a dedicated revenue stream to feed children. She stresses that universal access to food for children is a moral imperative and argues that the sugary drink tax is an additional reputable solution to reduce adverse health outcomes. Referencing the testimony of the University of Connecticut's Dr. Tatiana Andreyeva, she argues that this type of tax has led to better outcomes and sustained economic health in different states, cities, and countries with broad public support. Dr. Andreyeva's research also found that the marketing for these drinks disproportionately targets low-income communities.

Dr. Tatiana Andreyeva, Associate Professor, University of Connecticut Dept. of Agricultural & Resource Economics

Dr. Andreyeva supports this bill and cites her background at the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health and as a fiscal policy expert for the World Health Organization. She testifies that 83 countries and 17 local jurisdictions worldwide have adopted this type of tax, and it has been shown to reduce consumption while not leading to job losses. Additionally, it creates substantial revenue that governments can use to reinvest in communities, which would work to address concerns regarding regressivity. She cites polling that indicates public support for universal school meals in the state, and details how the benefits of this policy outweigh the potential downsides.

Seth Iapuk, MD, Pediatric Cardiologist, Member, American Heart Association

Dr. Iapuk emphasizes his support for this bill, stressing the substantial risk that obesity poses on both people and our economy. He testifies that, “The results of obesity in childhood and adolescence are well established and include diabetes and other endocrine abnormalities such as polycystic kidney disease; heart disease- the number one killer in America- including hypertension, lipid abnormalities and coronary artery disease; pulmonary problems including sleep apnea and asthma; bone and joint problems; and significant psychosocial problems.” Moreover, he highlights that the annual cost of obesity-related medical conditions is \$200 billion, along with the negative impacts to worker productivity. He cites a study from Lancaster University that concludes that the marketing of unhealthy food and drinks to children is a major contributor to America’s obesity epidemic. Through this research, he concludes that it will take societal change, such as this bill, to resolve this issue.

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

Ms. Infahsaeng and the UWCWC support this bill because universal no-cost school meals help to combat childhood hunger while supporting families who are facing rising costs. They recognize some of the concerns regarding this tax, but they emphasize that evidence from cities with similar taxes on sugary drinks did not cause job losses, are not substantially regressive, and do not increase cross-border sales. Moreover, they cite that 14-16% of the residents in Connecticut are food insecure, which is the highest rate in New England. Around 26% of households with children experience food insecurity, and that rate doubles in urban areas. They argue, “No-cost school 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, increase federal reimbursements, and give local school districts greater certainty and stability in planning their budgets.”

Several people testified in support of this bill, stating that universal school meals would be a crucial investment for middle- and working-class families. It would save families money, especially for those who do not qualify for other safety nets, while also improving students’ health, academic outcomes, and educational opportunities. In supporting the sugary drink tax, they highlight the negative health impacts that sugary drinks have on both children and adults, including weight gain and chronic disease. Moreover, they argue that the taxes could be utilized for community health initiatives.

Daniel Fitzmaurice
Tim Gabriele
Kathleen Callahan
Stephanie Deason
Margaret Dreher
Maryam Elahi
Karen Gardner
Dr. Jim Krieger
Russ Mills
Jeanne Milstein
Jeff Sidewater
Jim Williams

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

Rep. Vincent Candelora, House Minority Leader for the State House Republican Caucus: Rep. Candelora and the House Republican Caucus oppose this bill, arguing that this would create an additional tax increase while the legislature is attempting to create a bipartisan budget that decreases the tax burden on Connecticut families. They acknowledge the negative health impacts of sugary

drinks, but express concern regarding the regressive fiscal impact on the low-income communities that commonly consume these drinks. Additionally, they state that this measure could harm the state's business competitiveness.

Guy Bentley, Director of Consumer Freedom at the Reason Foundation: Mr. Bentley and the Reason Foundation, a nonprofit think tank, oppose this bill due to the regressive nature of the tax. Additionally, he highlights that other cities that have imposed this tax have gained unreliable funding streams from it, thereby compromising the programs that it is supposed to fund. He cites several studies that indicate that the tax did not reduce obesity rates in the cities that implemented it, arguing that it will just cause consumers to shift to different products.

Larry Cafero, Executive Director of the Wine and Spirits Wholesalers of CT: Mr. Cafero opposes this bill because it would impact alcoholic beverages due to the tax on certain syrups that are used in these drinks. He argues that alcoholic beverages are already heavily taxed and regulated, and this bill would further complicate the regulatory environment for stores that sell alcohol products. Therefore, he requests that language be included to exclude alcoholic beverages and ingredients from this bill.

Scott Dolch, President and CEO of the CT Restaurant and Hospitality Association: Mr. Dolch and the Association testify against this bill, arguing that this is the wrong approach to funding universal state meals. The tax would disproportionately impact restaurants, hotels, and small businesses, making them pass these costs onto consumers. He states that, "Programs like universal school meals deserve broad, stable funding solutions that are shared across the tax base rather than relying on a single industry to shoulder the cost. We should be finding ways to support our local employers, not layering on new costs that discourage growth and put them at a competitive disadvantage."

Several business owners in Connecticut oppose this bill because of the financial strain that it would place on businesses and their customers. They stress the negative impact that this will have on their operating costs and warn that it could drive consumers away from their businesses.

Jaylene Acevedo
Andrew Che
Bob Chicoine
Dominick Cingari
Dominique Darwill
Tony Escalente
Harry Garafalo
Leisha John
Yoshi Kuba
Bob LaBonne
Robert Rybick
Pedro Valnos
Ibanka Wato
Alex Shawn
Samantha Ruth
Penny Morose
Albert Martha

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