



M E M O R A N D U M

To: The Honorable Dan McKee
Governor, State of Rhode Island
From: The Rhode Island Food Policy Council
Date: February 17, 2023

Subject: Support for “Healthy School Meals for All”

Dear Governor McKee:

As a leader in improving education and supporting students, we are writing to ask that you please include Healthy School Meals for All (also known as Universal Free School Meals) in your FY2024 budget. Healthy School Meals for All means offering high quality, nutritious and locally-sourced meals to all students, regardless of their household income, for free as part of the school day so they can learn and thrive. Healthy School Meals for All supports student well-being, reduces administrative costs, increases investment in food service programs, eliminates unpaid meal debt, removes stigma from the lunchroom, and increases equity in our schools. A Healthy School Meals for All program creates an opportunity to leverage our local food economy and invest in the health of Rhode Island citizens. A 2021 Rockefeller Foundation report (True Cost of Food: School Meals Case Study) indicates that at the national level, the \$18.7 billion School Lunch and Breakfast Program Budget yielded \$21 billion in net value to society through improvements in health outcomes and poverty reduction.

The pandemic taught us many important lessons – and with school meals, we learned there is a better way to provide vital nutrition to our children. During the period of March 2020 – June 2022, the USDA provided funding for schools to offer meals free of charge to all students due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This effectively served as a successful trial run of a Healthy School Meals for All policy. Regrettably, the federal pandemic waivers expired prior to the start of the current school year and, once again, school meals programs must operate under a tiered payment system of free, reduced-price, or full-price meals depending on family income eligibility.

With continued inaction at the federal level, it is time for Rhode Island to lead and ensure our children are hunger-free and ready to learn. Maine and California have already enacted legislation making Healthy School Meals for All permanent. In the recent election, Colorado voters approved a ballot measure to provide free meals for all public school students. Massachusetts, Vermont and Nevada approved a one-year extension for the 22-23 school year and many other states are working on permanent legislation. Serving school meals to all students at no cost on a permanent basis would be a gamechanger for students, families, and schools in our state.

Children and teens cannot learn on an empty stomach. Sadly, there are many students that need a nutritious breakfast and lunch at school who do not qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. Food insecurity is at an all-time high in our state. According to the RI Community Food Bank, nearly one in three households in Rhode Island are food insecure, meaning they struggle to afford adequate



food. The RI Life Index identified 41 percent of households with children as food insecure in 2022, as compared to 25 percent in 2021. This crisis has health, educational, and economic consequences, leaving children particularly vulnerable to the long-term impact. Food insecurity can lead to a variety of negative health conditions, including diet-related disease, and has severe consequences on a child's future health. Schools are an important source of nutrition and are a safeguard against chronic food insecurity. Healthy School Meals for All will benefit thousands of students each day and be a major step forward in eliminating health inequities.

The current policy for school meals, whereby some children are expected to pay while others receive their meals for free, creates stigma and shame for students that rely on school meals for their basic needs, and serves as a barrier for those students who are not eligible but are still experiencing food insecurity. It is an antiquated and broken system. RI's education and school nutrition professionals haven't wavered in their mission to keep kids fed, healthy and ready to learn, but we must do better for our children and the pandemic showed us that Healthy School Meals for All is the way. School meals are an integral part of the school day and a contributor to student success, and should be no different than textbooks, technology, transportation, access to school nurses, and other services provided to all students without cost. Universal school meals incentivize greater participation in the school meals program and allows schools to better invest in equipment, staff training, and initiatives such as farm-to-school that focus on scratch cooking.

BENEFITS OF PROVIDING FREE MEALS TO ALL STUDENTS

- Ensures all students are hunger-free and ready to learn
- Reduces the stigma associated with eating school meals
- Ends the problem of unpaid school meal debt
- Eases administrative burden for schools
- Supports school nutrition finances and operations

Healthy School Meals for All is an important step toward increasing equity in our schools, investing in education, and streamlining school nutrition programs. It is also one of the most impactful and holistic actions we can take to address hunger in Rhode Island.

Please include Healthy School Meals for All in your FY2024 budget to ensure ALL Rhode Island children can thrive and succeed. Our organization would be happy to provide additional information and/or meet with you to further discuss this pressing issue.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Members of the Rhode Island Food Policy Council

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