



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 14, 2023

CONTACT: Stephanie Mandeville, NEA Rhode Island
smandeville@neari.org | 401-318-0410

Healthy School Meals for All: It's time to prioritize children, families, and schools

Providence, R.I. – A coalition of more than 40 local organizations joined together today in the Statehouse library in support of “Healthy School Meals for All,” a policy which would offer breakfast and lunch to all public-school students at no cost, regardless of their household income, as part of the school day so they can learn and thrive. The group is supporting proposed legislation in the Senate ([SB2320](#)) and the House ([HB7400](#)), sponsored by Senate Committee on Education Chairwoman Sandra Cano and Deputy Majority Leader Justine Caldwell respectively.

A “Healthy School Meals for All” policy ensures all public-school students are hunger-free and ready to learn, reduces stigma associated with eating school meals, ends the problem of unpaid school meal debt, eases administrative burden for schools, and supports school nutrition finances and operations. It is an important step toward a holistic investment in education and equity in our schools, and an impactful action to address hunger in the Ocean State.

We saw this policy in action during the COVID pandemic when federal funding was provided from the USDA to offer meals free of charge to all students. Since then, states like California, Minnesota, Colorado, New Mexico, Michigan, and our New England neighbors Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont have made Healthy School Meals for All a permanent part of the school day and Rhode Island should follow their lead.

“Imagine schools sourcing food from local farms and doing more scratch cooking. Greater participation and investment in school meals can improve offerings and boost our local economy.” **said Tobias Wessling, a student at Davies Career & Technical High School.** “Continuing learning and growth depend on healthy eating. Healthy School Meals for All is a policy that guarantees all public-school students, regardless of household income, have access to breakfast and lunch at no cost throughout the school day.”

Rhode Islanders support a Healthy School Meals for All program. According to the Rhode Island Survey Initiative conducted by the URI Harrington School of Communications & Media in September of 2023, 68% support legislation that requires free lunches to be provided for all K-12 students attending public schools. (<https://web.uri.edu/harrington/ri-survey-initiative/>)

“Research shows that empty bellies are a barrier to learning for children and youth and school meals play a critical role in student health and academic success,” **said Karin Wetherill, Co-Director of the Healthy Schools Coalition.** “We can improve learning, eliminate student meal debt and shame, and foster improved quality in school meal programs by making ‘Healthy School Meals for All’ permanent in every RI public school district.”

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“The Rhode Island Community Food Bank is serving nearly 80,000 people every month through its statewide network of member agencies, significantly more than the height of the pandemic,” **said Food Bank CEO Andrew Schiff**. “Healthy School Meals for All legislation is a cost-effective way to improve attendance, behavior, and academic achievement for Rhode Island kids. It also takes the pressure off the Food Bank’s network of agencies by reducing food insecurity for Rhode Island families with children.”

“As a music educator who has been at the elementary and secondary levels, I see that food insecurity causes more than just hunger. Students who have access to food are more likely to be focused, better behaved, and better able to manage their emotions,” **said Chelsea Anderson, an East Providence educator**. “Many families may fall just outside the eligibility criteria to qualify for free or reduced lunches, but are still struggling, which may result in families making difficult decisions. Let’s take that burden off the families in our communities and ensure students have access to nutritious meals so they can truly succeed.”

For more information, visit rischoolmeals4all.com



American Academy of Pediatrics – RI Chapter
American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network
American College of Cardiology – RI Chapter
American Heart Association
Aquidneck Community Table
Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island
Care Transformation Collaborative Rhode Island
City of Providence – Department of Housing & Human Services
Economic Progress Institute
Farm Fresh Rhode Island
FoodCorps
Hope & Main
League of Women Voters of Newport County
National Education Association Rhode Island
Oasis International
Open Door Health
Parents Leading for Educational Equity RI
Protect Our Healthcare RI
Rhode Island Academy of Nutrition & Dietetics
Rhode Island AFL-CIO
Rhode Island Alliance of YMCAs
Rhode Island Association of School Business Officials
Rhode Island Association of School Principals
Rhode Island Certified School Nurse Teachers Association
Rhode Island Coalition for Children and Families
Rhode Island Community Food Bank
Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals
Rhode Island Food Policy Council
Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition
Rhode Island Kids Count
Rhode Island Medical Society
Rhode Island PTA
Rhode Island Public Health Institute
Rhode Island School Superintendents' Association
Rhode Island State Nurses Association
Rhode Island Student Assistance Services
The Womxn Project
United Way of Rhode Island
Washington County Coalition for Children
West Warwick Health Equity Zone
Woonsocket Health Equity Zone
Young Voices