



March 7, 2024

The Honorable Marvin Abney, Chair  
House Committee on Finance  
Rhode Island House of Representatives  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, RI 02903

**SUBJECT: Support for House Bill 7400 – Healthy School Meals for All**

Dear Chair Abney and Members of the Committee:

We respectfully request that you support House Bill 7400 by Rep. Caldwell and fund **Healthy School Meals for All** in the FY25 Budget. Healthy School Meals for All means offering breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost as part of the school day, regardless of their household income, so they can learn and thrive.

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. **As we strive to improve academic performance and achieve Massachusetts' educational outcomes, we must follow our neighbor's lead and ensure Rhode Island children are fed for success.**

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 pandemic (March 2020 – June 2022), the USDA provided funding for schools to offer meals free of charge to all students. 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 22-23 school year and school meal programs are once again operating under a tiered payment system of free, reduced-price, or full-price meals depending on family income eligibility.

**It is time for Rhode Island to lead and ensure our children are hunger-free and ready to learn.** With continued inaction at the federal level, states are stepping up to fill the gap. **Eight states have already made Healthy School Meals for All permanent including: Maine, California, Minnesota, Colorado, New Mexico, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Vermont.** An additional 26 states have bills introduced and/or advocacy coalitions formed. 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, just as it has been for our neighbors.

**Children and teens cannot learn on an empty stomach.** Sadly, there are students in every community in our state in need of a nutritious breakfast and lunch at school who do not qualify for free or reduced-

price school meals. Findings in the RI Community Food Bank's recent *2023 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island* are cause for serious concern. The report shows that a record number of Rhode Islanders are seeking food assistance, with communities of color and families with children at the greatest risk of hunger.<sup>i</sup>

High food prices continue to take a toll on both low-income and moderate-income families in our state. **According to findings from the RI Life Index, food insecurity remains close to the same high level found last year, with 29% of households reporting that they cannot afford adequate food.**<sup>ii</sup> **The risk of hunger is even greater for households with children: 38%.**<sup>iii</sup> 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 diseases, and has severe consequences on a child's future health. School meals 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 and education 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 an inequitable barrier for students who are not eligible but are still experiencing food insecurity.** The current system is antiquated and broken. Rhode Island's education and school nutrition professionals are committed to their mission of keeping kids fed, healthy, and ready to learn, but we must support and invest in our schools to do better for our children.

**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 in public schools without cost.** Universal school meals incentivize greater participation in the school meals program and allow schools to better invest in equipment, staff training, and initiatives such as farm-to-school that focus on scratch cooking.



#### **BENEFITS OF OFFERING HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL**

- Reduces the prevalence of child hunger and food insecurity.
- Ensures all students are well-nourished and ready to learn.
- Supports student well-being.
- Improves learning outcomes.
- Improves attendance rates.
- Reduces 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.

**Please support House Bill 7400 and fund Healthy School Meals for All in the FY25 Budget to ensure ALL Rhode Island children can thrive and succeed.** The budget needed to support this initiative could be minimized if the state required that school districts maximize access to federal funds by participating in the Community Eligibility Provision, known as CEP, or other federal options. The cost of this expansion is estimated to be \$35 million. **We believe our children and our schools are worth it – and Rhode Islanders do too.** According to the Rhode Island Survey Initiative led by the University of Rhode Island's Harrington School for Communication and Media; the Social Science Institute for Research, Education, and Policy; and the Department of Political Science; **68% approve** of legislation that requires free lunches to be provided for all K-12 students attending public schools.<sup>iv</sup>

We would be happy to provide additional information. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

**The Healthy School Meals for All Coalition**

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  
Farm Fresh RI  
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 Public Health Institute  
Rhode Island School Superintendents’ Association  
Rhode Island State Nurses Association  
Rhode Island Student Assistance Services  
The Womxn Project  
Washington County Coalition for Children  
West Warwick Health Equity Zone  
Woonsocket Health Equity Zone  
Young Voices

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<sup>i</sup> *2023 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island*, Rhode Island Community Food Bank, 2023. [2023-RICFB-StatusReport-FINAL-digital.pdf \(rifoodbank.org\)](#)

<sup>ii</sup> RI Life Index, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and Brown University School of Public Health, 2023.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> *Rhode Island Survey Initiative*, University of Rhode Island Harrington School for Communication and Media; Social Science Institute for Research, Education, and Policy; and Department of Political Science, 2023. [https://web.uri.edu/harrington/wp-content/uploads/sites/2164/RI-Survey\\_Results\\_2023-1.pdf](https://web.uri.edu/harrington/wp-content/uploads/sites/2164/RI-Survey_Results_2023-1.pdf)