

Committee on Children JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: SB-36

Title: AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL LUNCH DEBT.

Vote Date: 2/25/2021

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 2/4/2021

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Committee on Children

Rep. Michael A. Winkler, 56th Dist.

Rep. Eleni Kavros DeGraw, 17th Dist.

Rep. Gary A. Turco, 27th Dist.

Rep. Raghiv Allie-Brennan, 2nd Dist.

Rep. Mary Welander, 114th Dist.

Rep. Jaime S. Foster, 57th Dist.

Sen. Saud Anwar, 3rd Dist.

Sen. Catherine A. Osten, 19th Dist.

Sen. Marilyn V. Moore, 22nd Dist.

REASONS FOR BILL:

This bill would allow for children who are not able to afford school meals to still receive food from their public school. When a person is hungry it is very difficult to focus on anything, and this effect can be seen more strongly in children, therefore no child enrolled in the public education system should have any disciplinary action against them because of unpaid school lunch.

On line 23 language is added in order to determine that after July 1st, 2021 a local or regional board of education will have to include in their policy or procedure three requirements described by this subsection.

On line 42 language is added in order to determine that any gifts, donations or grants given to schools with the purpose to pay for unpaid school lunch debt are allowed.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

No Response from Administration/Agency to this bill offered

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Robin Lamott Sparks, Executive Director End Hunger Connecticut: He is in favor of this bill. He explains what “food shaming” is and how “we rank in the top 10 in the country for the number of children who participate in the free summer meals program”. Due to the pandemic, even though many families can receive meals through the SNAP Program and other local food distributions, many still rely on school meals. Robin Lamott also states that school lunch debt is “merely a symptom of the larger problem of childhood food insecurity”, he proposes that future state budgets should reserve funds to ensure every child has access to no-cost school meals even after this school year concludes. Currently, due to USDA waiver extensions, school meals are offered at no cost until the end of the 20-21 school year, after the deadline, families who find themselves on the cusp of the qualifications, will most likely have to reapply for reduced-price school meals, and many CT families still may not be able to afford reduced lunch rates. In addition, children of color experience food insecurity at higher rates in our state, therefore by addressing one issue, two problems may be solved.

Cindy Dubuque-Gallo, LMSW: She is in favor of this bill. Cindy shares her personal experience as a church volunteer where she was in contact with youth who were being shamed by the cafeteria staff for not being able to afford food, in addition, the school she volunteered at did not allow children to get foods considered “a la carte” due to the enforcement of nutritional guidelines. However, she points out, “food is not a privilege; food is a human right.”. Cindy suggests that some schools where children are experiencing lunch debt are eligible for Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) through the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 - A program where if 40% of the school or district are eligible for SNAP or TANF, then the whole school or district can receive free lunch, subsidized by the federal government. She also states that “The child I spoke of earlier goes to a CEP eligible school, but the school district chooses to not participate in the program. Therefore, this child, who otherwise could have access to free lunch is in debt, experiences shame and goes hungry.”

Cindy asks the committee to consider adding the following language: “schools can and are encouraged to reach out to families experiencing debt to find out the circumstances and offer linkages to social service supports (including applying for free lunch, SNAP, and other entitlements)”. She points out that the federal law only protects the privacy of students who already receive free and reduced lunch, therefore reaching out to the children who are experiencing debt would not be illegal. Further, while some school districts already reach out to families to provide assistance, without a formal policy the implementation is uneven, and children will suffer.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

Theresa Lumas, Director of Finance and Administration at Amity Regional School District No. 5: She is not in favor of this bill. She states that in the Amity Regional School District, of the students who chose to remain remote for the entirety of the semester, less

than 10 families pickup meals daily. In October, when the high school turned into a fully hybrid schedule, the challenge was to find spaces where meals could be served to students, and there was virtually, no participation. Even when the bags are by the exit of the school and reminders are sent, participation is extremely low, and the loss of ala carte sales is devastating to the program. Theresa brings some data showing that the amount of meals served in November 2020 was 10 000 shorter than what was served in November 2019. The district also reduced staff to a minimum because the costs of individual packaging of meals are greater. Lastly, she states that “None of the ESSER funds, CRF or FEMA grants allow for food service losses. The burden is falling to the general operating budgets of school districts and it is unsustainable.”

Connecticut Association of School Board Officials: The association is not in agreement with this bill. Even though the organization does believe that immediate action must be taken, it also points out how the real issue is the continuing growth of unpaid balances due to non-payment by some who can afford it. The National School Lunch Program does not allow these programs to carry or cover negative student balances. Therefore, at the end of the year, the food service program must bill the school district for the unpaid balance remaining. In addition, the association also points out how it is visible how covid affected the community, though it is also pointed out how revenues dropped, and expenses increased and how “these losses must be borne by BOE and such losses are unsustainable.” Further, the board also gives a suggestion: “School districts need additional state and federal funding to support these food service deficits. In addition to funding, the federal and state officials need to adopt more flexible spending guidelines and timelines to allow schools districts to deal with all the Covid-19 impacts on their students, staff and the community. We, also encourage key stakeholders to explore together other long-term solutions (i.e., expanding National School lunch program) to help address these problems.”

Erica Biagetti, President of School Nutrition Association of Connecticut: She is not in favor of the bill. She states how important it is to provide food to children and how much the pandemic has impacted the association’s goals. She also states that since “many school districts in Connecticut have students who owe money for all different reasons [...] We [the association] anticipate this bill could increase the number and amount of unpaid balances.” And that for many schools, having a growing amount of unpaid balances could represent a significant problem. Erica also brings data from other states saying that “in other states that have placed restrictions on debt collection have shown that, anecdotally, unpaid meal debts have significantly risen after such legislation has been introduced.” And “Restricting the ability to collect unpaid meal charges will place an additional financial burden on an already stressed system.”

The association also requests clarification on the wording used starting on Line 30 stating “(2) a declaration of the right for any child to purchase a meal, which meal may exclude any a la cart items or be limited to one meal daily”. The association recommends that a fiscal analysis be completed prior to moving forward so that the extent of the effect of this bill on already strained Board of Education and municipal budgets can be determined.

Erica also brings up examples from 13 other states around CT where the state government began to fund these meals instead of charging the parents for them.

Reported by: Gabriela Dos Santos

Date: March 6th 2021