

March 26, 2024

**Capitol Region Education Council (CREC)  
Food Service Program Coordinator**

HB 5510 An Act Concerning Funding for Student Meals

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Berthel, Representative Nuccio, and esteemed members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Kayleen Perez, and I represent the Capitol Region Education Council as well as the School Nutrition Association of CT. I am a resident of Middletown and work for the CREC Regional Education Service Center which supports school districts in Hartford County. Maintaining school breakfast and meals for students who qualify for reduced-price meals in the budget is very important to me. All our kids need the tools to do their best in school, and breakfast is the best way to ensure they start their day right. I support HB 5510, An Act Concerning Funding for School Meals.

It's important to note that in Connecticut, a family can earn no more than \$55,500 annual gross income to receive meals at no cost. However, according to the United Way of Connecticut, that same family's ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) Household Survival Budget is \$126,000 for 2023, leaving a large gap in the ability to pay for necessities. 80% of Connecticut towns have at least 1 in 5 households that are ALICE; offering them school meals for all is one tool that assists these households economically and eases a family's stress.

Hungry kids don't learn. All the research supports this statement. I have seen this to be true as a Head Start Health and Nutrition Specialist for 8 years and even more now in my role as Food Service Program Coordinator. Also, hungry children are not fully prepared to learn which results in disruptions in the classroom. This has become more evident in the recent years as our families reside in a food desert as they have little to no access to healthy and affordable foods. We have seen time and time again, hungry children coming to school. We utilize many resources to ensure our children never leave school feeling the way they came in, hungry.

Important to note; school debts take away necessary funds needed for enrichment advancement opportunities in school. If we could eliminate paying off unpaid school debts we could cycle that money into buying more locally sourced, fresh food items. We can use this money to incorporate school gardens, partner with local farmers to enhance agricultural education in our schools. Children would have the opportunity to learn how to grow their own food and in turn, help our cities start and maintain gardens in food deserts that may not have the means or understanding to do so.

Research shows us that when meals are offered at no cost at school to everyone, there is less absenteeism and less bullying, and kids are more prepared to learn. Even students who eat something at home and get a school breakfast perform better on tests. There's a reason that schools offer breakfast to their students during testing days.

School meals make a difference to students, their families, and the school community. Please ensure our kids have the tools to build their success.

Thank you.  
Kayleen Perez

