



**Testimony in Support of
Raised Bill 1217, An Act Providing School Meals To All Students**
Committee on Children
February 6, 2024

**Mendi Blue Paca
President & CEO, Fairfield County's Community Foundation**

Senator Maher, Representative Paris, Senator Martin, Representative Dauphinais and esteemed members of the Committee on Children, Fairfield County's Community Foundation is grateful for this opportunity to submit written testimony in support of Raised Bill 1217: An Act Providing School Meals To All Students.

Fairfield County's Community Foundation serves the 23 towns and cities in Fairfield County. We work closely with community organizations, nonprofits, businesses, and philanthropists to address challenges and identify opportunities to create a Fairfield County where everyone has an equitable opportunity to thrive. Informed by three decades of partnering with and serving our community, we have awarded over \$400 million in grants to nonprofits in Fairfield County and beyond.

The Foundation has long committed to addressing educational inequity in Fairfield County, granting over \$1 million annually to organizations working to help youth and young adults in Fairfield County graduate with a high school degree and prepare for post-secondary education or employment. We fund organizations that provide the needed wraparound support to youth and young adults that leads to strong educational outcomes, including mental health and food support.

Given the rise in food insecurity across Connecticut, we strongly support providing school meals to all students. According to the [2023 Fairfield County Community Wellbeing Index](#), a higher share of Connecticut residents reported experiencing food insecurity in 2022 (17%) compared to 2021 (10%). This increase was higher for adults with children at home. This critical legislation would ensure that every student in Connecticut has access to nutritious school meals at no cost, removing financial barriers that hinder learning and overall student development.

Proper nutrition is the foundation of learning. Research shows that when meals are offered at no cost at school to everyone, there is less absenteeism and less bullying, and students are better able to focus, engage, and thrive academically. Ensuring free school meals eliminates stigma, increases participation, and provides the nourishment our students need to reach their full potential. This is essential to closing educational opportunity gaps.

Critical funding for education, including public and philanthropic funding, is better spent when students' basic needs are met. School meals make a difference to students, their families, and the school community. Please ensure our kids have the tools to build their success by passing Raised Bill 1217.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact Liz Hoagland, Director of Education and Workforce Development, lhoagland@fccfoundation.org or 203-750-3208.

Sincerely,

Mendi Blue Paca
President & CEO