

TESTIMONY SUPPORTING SB-1217:
AN ACT PROVIDING SCHOOL MEALS TO ALL STUDENTS.

Committee on Children

February 6, 2025

Presented By: Kathleen Callahan, MSW

Dear Honorable Chairpersons Maher and Paris, Ranking Members Martin and Dauphinais, Vice Chairs Cohen and Welander, and all other Members of the Committee on Children of the Connecticut General Assembly:

My name is Kathleen Callahan, a resident of Stratford, and the Director of Policy and Civic Engagement for the Connecticut Cradle to Career Coalition, a network of five StriveTogether partnerships committed to improving economic mobility for Connecticut's youth and families—Bridgeport Prospers, Danbury Collective, Norwalk ACTS, Stamford Cradle to Career, and Waterbury Bridge to Success. I am testifying on behalf of the Coalition, and we call upon the Committee to support *SB-1217: An Act Providing School Meals to All Students*.

Our advocacy focuses on economic, educational, and health equity, addressing systemic barriers that impact youth and families while promoting policy solutions that prioritize youth reconnection. At a time of financial constraints and federal uncertainty, Connecticut must balance fiscal responsibility with strategic investments that secure our future—including ensuring equitable access to support for all students.

Youth disconnection and disengagement are symptoms of fragmented systems, not isolated individual challenges. Environmental factors, structures, and policies impact health, social and economic opportunities, and overall quality of life as young people transition into adulthood. The challenges we see today underscore the importance of understanding individual behavior within the broader contexts of community, education, and economic stability.¹

Access to nutritious meals is fundamental to student well-being, academic success, and long-term health. However, according to the latest report by the Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity, food insecurity remains a persistent challenge in Connecticut,² affecting between 10.4% and 17% of the population. Rising food costs—up 25% since 2019—

¹ Boston Consulting Group. (2023, October). *Connecticut's Unspoken Crisis: Getting Young People back on Track*. Retrieved from https://www.dalioeducation.org/Customer-Content/www/CMS/files/231011_Report_Final_vDigital_LowRes.pdf.

² Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity. (2024). *2024 Food Security Annual Report*. Retrieved from <https://wp.cga.ct.gov/cwceo/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Food-Insecurity-in-Connecticut-Report-2024.pdf>.



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have placed additional strain on families, making it harder to afford nutritious meals. At the same time, federal funding for food security programs has declined, leaving critical gaps in support and heightening concerns amid current economic uncertainties.

The Connecticut State Department of Education previously reported that chronic absenteeism rates for students eligible for free meals are more than three times higher than those who are ineligible for lunch subsidies.³ This data underscores the direct link between food security and student attendance, engagement, and academic performance.

Universal free school meals provide a tested, effective solution to reducing food insecurity while ensuring that every child has access to the nourishment they need to learn, grow, and thrive. For many children, school meals are their most consistent source of daily nutrition. Guaranteeing free meals for all students ensures that no child goes hungry, eliminates stigma, and reduces administrative burdens for schools and families alike.

Regardless of family income, public schools provide wraparound supports beyond direct educational instruction. By ensuring that every student has access to nutritious meals, we empower families to make other critical financial decisions, alleviating economic stress and promoting greater household stability.

Hungry children are more likely to have trouble concentrating, increased behavioral issues, and higher rates of absenteeism—all of which have lasting consequences on academic achievement and long-term success. When students struggle to focus due to hunger, their engagement in learning declines, increasing their risk of falling behind in coursework and, ultimately, disengaging from school. These challenges compound over time, contributing to youth disconnection—a growing national concern with far-reaching implications for education, workforce development, and public health.

Youth disconnection is deeply tied to systemic inequities related to social determinants of health, including access to nutritious food, stable housing, quality education, and healthcare. Food insecurity not only affects physical well-being but also contributes to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and chronic stress—all of which heighten the risk of school disengagement. Without reliable access to meals, students may be forced to work long hours to support their families, further pulling them away from their education and limiting their future opportunities.

Addressing youth disconnection requires a comprehensive, cross-sector approach that ensures students have the foundational supports needed to remain engaged in school and on a

³ Connecticut State Board of Education. (2017, April). *Reducing Chronic Absence in Connecticut's Schools*. Retrieved from https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/chronic-absence/prevention_and_intervention_guide.pdf.



pathway to success. Universal free school meals are a key strategy in this effort—providing a guaranteed source of nutrition, reducing stress on families, and creating a school environment where every child has an equal opportunity to focus, learn, and thrive.

By prioritizing policies that address food insecurity, Connecticut can take a meaningful step toward keeping youth connected to school, strengthening pathways to economic mobility, and ensuring that all students have the resources they need to reach their full potential.

Universal free school meals are a simple, effective, and necessary solution to food insecurity, educational disparities, and health inequities. Our collaborative, data-driven approach is rooted in collective impact, recognizing that no single organization alone can create large-scale, lasting social change. As we work to advance equitable outcomes for all of Connecticut's youth from cradle to career, we affirm that our children are our most vital investment.

The Connecticut Cradle to Career Coalition urges you to prioritize this investment and pass SB-1217 out of Committee.

With respect and gratitude for your service and consideration,

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The Connecticut Cradle to Career Coalition is a statewide collaborative uniting five StriveTogether partnerships serving 125,000 children across Bridgeport, Danbury, Norwalk, Stamford, and Waterbury. Through a collective impact approach and with fifteen community-based working groups and over 440 partner organizations, we work to advance policies and systems that ensure all children and families in Connecticut have access to equitable opportunities from early childhood through career success.



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