



H.B. No. 5214: An Act Concerning School Meals

Education Committee

February 23, 2026

Mendi Blue Paca

President & CEO, Fairfield County's Community Foundation

Representative Jennifer Leeper, Senator Douglas McCrory, Representative Lezlye Zupkus, Senator Eric Berthel, and esteemed Connecticut General Assembly members of the Education Committee, [Fairfield County's Community Foundation](#) is grateful for this opportunity to submit written testimony in support of **H.B. No. 5214: An Act Concerning School Meals**.

Fairfield County's Community Foundation serves twenty-three towns and cities, collaborating with organizations, businesses, and philanthropists to foster a fair and just community where all residents can thrive. Informed by three decades of partnering with and serving our community, we have awarded over \$420 million in grants to nonprofits in Fairfield County and beyond.

The Foundation has a long-standing commitment to supporting young people in Fairfield County, investing more than \$1 million annually in organizations that help youth and young adults graduate from high school and prepare for post-secondary education or employment. We fund organizations that provide the comprehensive wraparound supports—**such as mental health services and food assistance**—that lead to strong educational outcomes.

According to the [State of Food Insecurity in Connecticut 2025](#) report from the Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity, and Opportunity, food insecurity across Connecticut has worsened significantly and is projected to continue rising without major intervention. Feeding America estimates that Connecticut's food insecurity rate reached 14.3% in 2023—an overall increase of 40% since 2020, placing Connecticut above Maine for the highest food insecurity rate in New England.

In January 2026, in response to this alarming trend, the Community Foundation launched the Fairfield County Food Security Fund. The fund supports nonprofits and grassroots organizations working to address rising food insecurity across the region. Our goal is to distribute \$500,000 in grants to local organizations by July 1. While philanthropy can help address immediate needs, we recognize that long-term, systemic change in our food system requires government action. Providing free school breakfast and lunch to all students is one critical intervention that can help families access the nutritious food they need.

Given the rise in food insecurity across Connecticut, we strongly support providing school meals to all students. We commend the committee for its leadership in recognizing the vital role school meal programs play in student well-being. While the current bill ensures free breakfast for all students and free lunch for those eligible for free or reduced-price meals, we believe it is essential that lunch be provided at no cost to every student. Eliminating stigma and ensuring all children are well-nourished are critical to their ability to learn, grow, and thrive.

Proper nutrition is the foundation of learning. Research shows that when schools offer meals at no cost to all students 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 **H.B. No. 5214: An Act Concerning Scholl Meals**.

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