



September 18, 2021

Joint Committee on Education
24 Beacon St.
Room 511-B and Room 473G
Boston, MA 02133

RE: S.314/H.714 An Act relative to universal school meals

Dear Chairs Lewis and Peisch, and members of the committee:

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative is pleased to offer this written testimony in support of S.314/H.714 An Act relative to universal school meals

The Collaborative is a network of Massachusetts food system organizations, working to promote, monitor, and facilitate implementation of the 2015 Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan. The Plan was developed for and accepted by the Massachusetts Food Policy Council, a 17-member entity comprising state agency, legislative, and industry representatives, established by the Legislature and Governor to develop recommendations, including legislative and regulatory changes, to promote sustainability, equity, and resilience in the Commonwealth's food system.

The Plan supports this legislation, as does the Collaborative's more recent report *Massachusetts' Local Food System: Perspectives on Resilience and Recovery*. Published during the COVID crisis and based on input from hundreds of organizations and farmers throughout the Commonwealth, the report includes the recommendation: "The state should implement universal free school meals."

For hundreds of thousands of Commonwealth schoolchildren, school meals are the most consistent and healthy parts of their diet. For many of these students, however, the cost of meals means they are inaccessible, or the stigma that comes with using income-based benefits means they are not using these resources. As a result, students are unable to learn effectively, and they experience both short- and long-term negative health outcomes.

By ensuring that all students have the same access to school meals, the state's investment will help ensure positive public health outcomes not just for schoolchildren but for their families as well, and will contribute to better educational outcomes for all children. We urge the committee to report this bill favorably.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Sincerely,

Winton Pitcoff
Director