



July 17, 2023

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

RE: Testimony in support of S.261/H.603 An Act relative to universal school meals

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

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative is pleased to offer this written testimony in support of S.261/H.603, 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 Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan. We offer this testimony in accordance with the goals and recommendations of the Plan. You can find the Plan and how these issues fit into the context of Massachusetts' food system as a whole at mafoodsystem.org/plan.

The MA Food System Collaborative leads the Campaign for Food Literacy to ensure that all K - 12 students learn about the food system in schools. This campaign focuses on providing the infrastructure necessary for teachers to integrate lessons about agriculture, nutrition, food justice, and culinary skills into their classrooms. While students are learning about healthy food in the classroom, all students should have access to healthy food in the cafeteria.

For hundreds of thousands of Commonwealth schoolchildren, school meals are the most consistent and nutritious parts of their diet. Without the continuation of Universal School Meals, the cost of meals or the stigma of eating free or reduced priced meals could result in many students losing out on this critical source of nutrition. Food insecurity, including among families with children, has continued to remain at increased levels due to the economic impacts of the pandemic and falling levels of federal support, and universal school meals are an important piece of the policy solution to reduce hunger in the commonwealth.

Last year, the Legislature made the wise investment to extend school meals through the current school year in the FY2023 budget. Because of this extension, an additional 80,000 students ate lunch in October 2022 compared to October 2019 in schools not previously serving universal free meals.



30,000 of these students previously qualified for free meals—suggesting that eliminating the barrier of stigma increases participation.

By making Universal School Meals permanent, the state will ensure that all students have the same access to school meals, 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 these bills out favorably. Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Brittany Peats
MA Food System Collaborative
Boston, MA