



Education Committee

Public Hearing: February 23, 2026

Co-Chair Senator McCrory, Co-Chair Representative Leeper, Ranking Member Senator Berthel, Ranking Member Representative Zupkus, Vice Chair Senator Winfield, Vice Chair Representative Brown, and members of the Education Committee:

My name is Maryam Elahi, I am the President & CEO of the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut. We serve the 42 towns of eastern Connecticut in New London, Windham, and Tolland Counties. Last year, the Community Foundation provided over \$15 million in grants to nonprofits to create a thriving community and realize our vision of a healthy, thriving, sustainable Eastern Connecticut with greater equity for all.

Since 2020, the Community Foundation has provided over \$4 million in funding to child and youth serving organizations in Connecticut as well as hundreds of other nonprofits across Eastern CT which gives us a regional and in-depth perspective on the important issue of universal school meals. Additionally, the Community Foundation is leading a collaborative of over 110 organizations, foundations, institutions of higher learning and health care centers that are all deeply committed to the goals of our campaign to End Child Poverty Now in CT.

We support HB 5214 with the proviso that *both* breakfast and lunch are provided at no cost to all students. While we appreciate the inclusion of free breakfast in the current bill, limiting lunch to reduced-cost meals for eligible students does not go far enough. To truly address child hunger and eliminate stigma, Connecticut must provide universal free breakfast *and* free lunch for all children.

Providing free school meals for all children is an established best practice globally. Many of the leading developed countries provide free meals to school children regardless of status and income. And yet, in one of the wealthiest states in our nation, we are failing to address an essential requirement for children to excel in school. All our kids need the tools to do their best in school, and having healthy meals at school is the best way to ensure they have a productive day.

Research unequivocally demonstrates that hungry students struggle to concentrate in the classroom and are unable to reach their full academic potential. By providing nutritious meals at no cost, we not only address immediate hunger needs but also lay the groundwork for improved educational outcomes and enhanced overall well-being.

Recent years have underscored the indispensable role of no-cost school meals, particularly during the trials of the pandemic. With federal funding, we witnessed a surge in student participation in school

meal programs, leading to improved attendance rates, enhanced academic performance, and a noticeable decrease in in-school illnesses. These outcomes are a testament to the transformative power of ensuring that no child goes hungry at school. It is an investment in our future.

It is especially important that universal access includes both breakfast and lunch at no cost to families. We know that you may hear from parents who say that their child does not need a free meal program because they are able to send food from home. Well, what happens if that child forgets their lunch? A free school meal program ensures that they have an option to not go hungry on that school day.

Some districts in our state feel their population is not of a low enough income to warrant such a program. But they do not know what happens in each home – are there challenges in the home that cause the family to struggle with providing nutritious daily meals? Regardless of each family's circumstances, universal free school meals ensures that no child will go hungry while they are at school.

Additionally, implementing a no-cost school meals program would alleviate economic burdens on families, easing concerns about lunch debt and reducing household grocery expenses. In Connecticut, a family of 4 can earn no more than \$41,795 annual gross income to receive meals at no cost. However, according to the United Way of Connecticut, that same family's ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) Household Survival Budget is \$116,208, leaving a large gap in the ability to pay for necessities. 40% (580,520) of households in Connecticut are below the ALICE Threshold; providing school meals for all is one tool that assists these households economically and eases a family's stress.

Finally, if the legislature fails to institute a free school meals program, the burden is shifted to the family to fill forms and submit qualifying papers. Is this what you want to submit struggling families to do? And for children to feel the stigma of being the ones whose parents can't afford to feed them. We can do better here in CT.

Providing only free breakfast, while limiting lunch based on income eligibility, maintains administrative burdens and stigma that universal meals are designed to eliminate. A fully universal approach—free breakfast and free lunch for every student—is the clearest, most equitable solution.

I implore you to support the funding of this essential program. Together, let us demonstrate our unwavering dedication to the health, education, and future success of Connecticut's youth.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter.

Respectfully,

Maryam Elahi, J.D., M.A.L.D., L.H.D.

President & CEO

Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut