

March 21, 2024

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Berthel, Representative Nuccio, and esteemed members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Maryam Elahi, I am the President & CEO of the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut. The Community Foundation is part of a collaborative effort with 50 organizations to end child poverty in CT. Since 2020, the Community Foundation has provided around \$4 million in funding to child and youth serving organizations in Connecticut.

Maintaining school breakfast and meals for students who qualify for reduced-price meals in the budget is very important to us. All our kids need the tools to do their best in school, and breakfast is the best way to ensure they start their day right. We support HB 5510, An Act Concerning Funding for School Meals.

The 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.

Connecticut has already taken commendable steps by funding no-cost school meals during the 2022-2023 school year. However, we must seize this momentum and enshrine this commitment in permanent legislation to guarantee equitable access to food for all students, irrespective of their financial circumstances.

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.

Moreover, implementing a no-cost school meals program would alleviate economic burdens on families, easing concerns about lunch debt and reducing household grocery expenses. It's important to note that in Connecticut, a family can earn no more than \$55,500 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 \$126,000 for 2023, leaving a large gap in the ability to pay for necessities. 80% of Connecticut towns have at least 1 in 5 households that are ALICE; offering them school meals for all is one tool that assists these households economically and eases a family's stress.

Board of Trustees

Margaret O'Shea, *Chair*
Nicholas Fortson, *Vice Chair*
Sandy Hale, *Treasurer*
Carol Williams, *Secretary*

Joe DeLong
Lee-Ann Gomes
Leah Hartman
Izaskun Larrañeta
Catherine Marrison

Michael Rauh
Barbara Sahagan
Leah Schad
Morgan Tuck

Maryam Elahi,
President & CEO
maryam@cfect.org

I implore you to support the funding of this essential program, allocating \$16 million for the State Department of Education through the 2024-2025 school year. 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