



Legislative Testimony
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Written Testimony Supporting Senate Bill 929, An Act Expanding School Meal Programs to Provide Free School Meals to All Students

Senator Maher, Representative Linehan, Ranking Members Seminara and Dauphinais, and distinguished members of the Children Committee:

My name is Jess Zaccagnino, and I am the policy counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-CT). I am writing to testify in support of Senate Bill 929, An Act Expanding School Meal Programs to Provide Free School Meals to All Students.

The ACLU-CT believes in a world where all children are free from food insecurity. We support programs that seek to close the racial wealth gap and break the cycle of poverty. Federal child nutrition waivers that arose during the pandemic allowed all students to have access to free school meals, which reduced childhood hunger and poverty. Now that those programs are ending at the federal level, Connecticut has the chance to be a leader in the fight to end food insecurity by filling the gap because all children, regardless of their family's income, deserve access to food.

Families are already facing soaring prices of consumer goods and housing. Free school lunches for all is one way to alleviate the financial stress that families are experiencing. Data based on the 2016 to 2017 school year reveals that a family with two children would on average pay \$1,458 on breakfast and lunch for a 180-day school year.¹ One study found when the pandemic began, the number of households with

¹ See Elizabeth Chuck, *Free School Lunches for All Set to End, Creating "Perfect Storm" Amid High Inflation*, NBC (June 18, 2022), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/free-school-lunches-set-end-creating-perfect-storm-high-inflation-rcna33688>.

children that were experiencing food insecurity jumped by 14 percent.² Another study found that food insecurity tripled during the pandemic.³ Research also demonstrates that food insecurity is a racial justice issue: 19.1 percent of Black households and 15.6 percent of Hispanic households experienced food insecurity, compared to 7.9 percent of white households.⁴ We know that free or reduced-priced lunch programs have been successful in combatting food insufficiency by providing students with access to healthy foods. The National School Lunch Program resulted in a 14 percent decrease in food insecurity, and at the same time, students who have more nutritious meals perform better and are more focused in school.⁵

Extending free school lunches at the state level is a common sense step that this legislature can take to reduce childhood food insecurity. Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont have all extended free school meals. Connecticut must join its neighbors and lead the country in funding free school meals by passing Senate Bill 929. The ACLU-CT supports Senate Bill 929, and urges this Committee to do the same.

² Lauren Bauer, *About 14 Million Children in the US Are Not Getting Enough to Eat*, BROOKINGS INST. (July 9, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/09/about-14-million-children-in-the-us-are-not-getting-enough-to-eat/>.

³ Diane Schanzenbach & Abigail Pitts, *How Much Has Food Insecurity Risen? Evidence From the Census Household Pulse Survey*, Northwestern (2020), <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/documents/reports/ipr-rapid-research-reports-pulse-hh-data-10-june-2020.pdf>.

⁴ Christianna Silva, *Food Insecurity in the US By Numbers*, NPR (Sept. 27, 2020 at 4:30PM), <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/27/912486921/food-insecurity-in-the-u-s-by-the-numbers>.

⁵ Huang & Barnidge, *Low-Income Children's Participation in the National School Lunch Program and Household Food Insufficiency*, 150 SOC. SCI. MED. 8 (2016); Lott et al., *Rapid Health Impact Assessment on USDA Proposed Changes to School Nutrition Standards* (2020) <http://healthyeatingresearch.org/research/rapid-health-impact-assessment-on-usdaproposed-changes-to-school-nutrition-standards>.