Memorandum

To: Legislative Committee

From: Government Affairs and Public Health Staff

On: March 10, 2021

Re: HD.1161/SD.519 - Universal School Meal Legislation

Summary

When kids are hungry at school, they cannot learn. Hungry kids cannot concentrate, have lower academic achievement, suffer cognitive and developmental impairments, exhibit more behavioral problems, have more absences, visit the nurse more often, and are at higher risk of obesity. Legislation requiring universal free school meals in Massachusetts would recognize food as a basic need and right and allow every student access to the nutrition they need during the school day.

MAPC’s food policy advocacy

MAPC has long supported food policy priorities because we believe they advance equity and health across the Commonwealth. These are the initiatives we have been involved with:

- **Breakfast After the Bell.** MAPC supported this newly passed legislation, which requires schools with a high population of low-income students to provide breakfast to all students after the beginning of the school day.
- **Healthy Incentives Program (HIP).** HIP has provided over $21 million in local, healthy food to low-income families, which has gone to farmers in the Commonwealth.\(^1\) MAPC will continue its support to increase and expand the impact of HIP through securing dedicated and permanent funding.
- **SNAP Gap.** This legislation has made significant gains, with a requirement in the FY21 State budget to allow health care consumers to be considered for SNAP benefits when applying for public health insurance\(^2\) and $5 million authorized in the IT Bond Bill to finance the capital costs of a common application portal. The work continues, and MAPC will support release of these funds and expand the type of benefits eligible in this portal.\(^3\)
- **Massachusetts Food Trust.** Advocacy resulted in $1 million included in the economic development bond bill, as well as funding for program operation costs.\(^4\)

Complementing this advocacy, MAPC led the 2015 Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan, which serves as a guide for aligned state food system improvements, and today, MAPC supports Massachusetts towns and cities in food planning, which enables tackling local food system issues through municipal strategies and policy.

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1 Source: Massachusetts Food System Collaborative: https://mafoodsystem.org/projects/sub/hip-indivs/
2 Source: https://malegislature.gov/Budget/FY2021/SenateDebate/Amendments/271
3 Source: https://www.masslegalservices.org/content/its-time-finally-close-massachusetts-snap-gap-and-expand-common-apps-2021
4 Source: Massachusetts Public Health Association communication
MAPC’s Public Health and Government Affairs Teams are committed to advancing equitable food policy, through building on the momentum and successes to date and supporting new efforts. The Universal School Meals campaign and legislation begins with the basic assertion that food is an essential need and right, and it envisions a free school meal system that ensures all children can eat well, learn, and thrive. We believe this vision aligns with MAPC’s mission, and we are eager to lend our advocacy support.

**Background**
Food insecurity touches every community in Massachusetts. Today, 1 in 5 households with children are food insecure, with Black and Latinx families disproportionately impacted. Kids have always been one of the groups most impacted by food insecurity and its long-term consequences, and COVID-19 has exacerbated this issue.

School meals can account for half of the meals a child eats and are a critical source of nutrition. These meals help kids learn and be active in the short term, and thrive academically, physically, and emotionally in the long term. School meals also establish lifelong healthy eating habits that can reduce the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and obesity, along with the cost associated with these diseases.

Before the pandemic, less than half of low-income students ate school breakfast and lunch. While there are many reasons for this, two of the biggest barriers that stop children from participating in school meals are the cost of purchasing meals and the stigma of being singled out. Furthermore, over 1 in 4 children in food insecure households are not eligible for free or reduced meals. The high cost of living in Massachusetts leaves many families in a precarious state: they earn too much to receive federal assistance from programs such as SNAP, but too little to eat full and healthy diets.

**Bill Summary**
HD.1161/SD.519, An Act relative to universal school meals, filed by Representative Andy Vargas (Haverhill) and Senator Sal DiDomenico (Everett) would eliminate eligibility and financial barriers by ensuring all children are offered school meals (breakfast and lunch) at no cost to students or their families.

The bill would require all schools participating in the National School Lunch or Breakfast Program to make breakfast and lunch available at no cost to students. This would be accomplished by maximizing federal funds through the Community Eligibility Provision and Provision II programs where schools are eligible to adopt these programs. Under the bill, costs not reimbursed by federal funds would be paid by the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Early estimates are that universal school means would cost the Commonwealth $104-$120M annually.

Part of maximizing federal funds, is to ensure that eligible families are enrolled in SNAP. The more eligible people that are enrolled in federal programs, the less the program will cost DESE. This legislation requires that DESE, with consultation from the Department of Transitional Assistance, create guidelines for school districts to do outreach to families that could be eligible for food assistance programs. This bill would increase participation in school meals by as many as 50,000 students.

Implementation of universal school meals would also address some of the financial burdens schools and families face, protect school children from being involved in meal accounts, and would stop schools from pursuing humiliating and unethical practices as a result of unpaid school meal balances. Universal school meals would put an end to school meal debt, a bill that MAPC supported in the last legislative session.

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5 Definition of Food Insecurity: Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways. Source: USDA referenced definition from Life Sciences Research Office, S.A. Andersen, ed., "Core Indicators of Nutritional State for Difficult to Sample Populations," *The Journal of Nutrition* 120:1557S-1600S, 1990.

6 One in 10 households with children were food insecure before the COVID-19 pandemic. Source: Project Bread

7 Source for Background: Project Bread Feed Kids, Solve Hunger website: https://feedkidsma.org/
MAPC released its State of Equity Policy Agenda Update in February 2018. Breakfast After the Bell legislation was included as one of the recommendations, and thankfully was passed last session. Universal School Meals is the most logical next step that builds off of Breakfast After the Bell legislation.

**Recommendation**
MAPC recommends the Legislative Committee endorse HD.1161/SD.519.