

**Pennsylvania House of Representatives**  
**Committees on Education and Children & Youth**  
**Joint Meeting on the Importance of Childhood Nutrition and School Meals**

Testimony from The Honorable Emily Kinkead  
Member of the House of Representatives, 20<sup>th</sup> Legislative District

Chairwoman Bullock, Chairman Schweyer, Representative Jozwiak, Representative Topper, and members of the Education and Children & Youth committees – for those who do not know me, I am Emily Kinkead and I represent the people of the 20<sup>th</sup> Legislative District in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. Thank you for allowing me to testify about my legislation, HB 180, and one of the most basic, yet critically important, issues facing our Commonwealth: making sure our children – the future of our state – are fed and well nourished, and that food insecurity is eradicated from our communities.

First, let me take a moment to be very clear about what the word food insecure means. The USDA defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life. This can be a temporary situation for a family or can last a long time. It should be unacceptable to every person in this room that – in the richest country in the world – one person, child, or senior struggles with food insecurity. Yet, they do.

Across our Commonwealth, children are going hungry every single day. According to Feeding America's *Map the Meal Gap* report, one in seven children are food insecure. In my home county, Allegheny, the issue is worse as one in six children are food insecure.<sup>i</sup> These figures are based on data from the United States Census Bureau from the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, when government support programs in response to the outbreak of the virus were strong. But, as those supports ended, the issue of childhood hunger has only gotten worse. Experts anticipate that food insecurity rates will rise as new, updated data is published.

However, as members of the Legislature, we have an opportunity before us right now to make a critical investment in the fight against childhood food insecurity. My legislation, House Bill 180, would guarantee, under law, that every child enrolled in a Pennsylvania school will be provided with free a breakfast and lunch every school day of the year.

The data about the impact of childhood food insecurity is clear: students are more likely to skip school, score lower on tests, repeat a grade, be suspended from school, get sick, or even be hospitalized. We also know that school meals are one of the consistent sources of food for school age children. During the COVID-19 pandemic, laws passed by Congress and flexibilities and waivers issued by the United States Department of Agriculture ensured that all students – regardless of income or zip code – had access to free breakfast and lunch whether they were learning in person or remotely.

The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) just released a new report, *The Reach of School Breakfast and Lunch During the 2021–2022 School Year*. It found that when universal school meals were provided to all students during that school year over 15.5 million children received a breakfast, and 29.9 million children received a lunch on an average day during the 2021–2022 school year — an increase of nearly 1.6 million children (11.2 percent) in breakfast, and 10.1 million (51.1 percent) in lunch when compared

to the 2020–2021 school year.<sup>ii</sup> In Pennsylvania, the report found an increase of 76.1 percent in lunch participation and 18.7 percent in breakfast participation in the 2021–2022 school year over the 2020–2021 school year.<sup>iii</sup> Universal school meals worked. Participation rates went up. However, Congress failed to extend the program and the waivers and flexibilities expired.

Former Governor Wolf, in October 2022, restored universal free breakfast for all students for the remainder of the 2022–2023 school year – a program Governor Shapiro has included in his 2023–2024 budget proposal, along with a conversion of reduced-price lunch students to free. We should applaud him for including these investments in child nutrition in his proposal. However, my legislation will get the job over the finish line and provide universal schools for all students in Pennsylvania.

My bill, if enacted, would require that breakfast and lunch is served every school day to every student in a Pennsylvania elementary, middle, or high school that wants one, regardless of income, by establishing a permanent universal school meals program. This would codify the principle that no child should experience hunger and should have reliable access to the nourishment needed to achieve academic success, free from stigma or stress. It would do so by requiring school districts maximize existing federal funds under the National School Lunch Program and National Breakfast Program – such as Community Eligible Provision and other incentives – and establish the Universal School Meal Fund to reimburse eligible school districts for two meals every school day for all reduced-price eligible and paid status student up to the federal free reimbursement rates. Students aren't expected to pay for their books or transportation to and from school, so why should breakfast and lunch be any different?

Additionally, when administrators aren't tasked with collecting countless forms or being debt collectors, they can focus on creating programs and relationships to get local food in cafeterias or other nutrition initiatives. My legislation also includes a one-time allocation to help school districts address existing school meal debt that is burdening districts. One Food Services Director from Washington County recently told the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank about the impact of restoring universal school meals, "Our whole school environment would be uplifted. It's just the right thing to do."

My bill also acknowledges that there has been movement at the federal level to move towards universal free school meals and, therefore, includes a clawback provision that would be triggered should the federal government ever enact that program nationally.

Organizations across the Commonwealth have come out in favor of universal school meals for all, including: Allies for Children, Community Action Association of Pennsylvania, Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, Just Harvest, Pittsburgh Food Policy Council, School Nutrition Association of Pennsylvania, and The Food Trust – just to name a few. Administrators, educators, school boards, and other policy makers understand that universal school meals for all is more than just good policy, but it also makes a difference. That's why states across the country are passing universal school meals legislation and we should be next.

My bill is an investment in the academic, mental, and physical wellbeing of every child in Pennsylvania. Join me in getting this done. Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> Gundersen, C., Strayer, M., Dewey, A., Hake, M., & Engelhard, E. (2022). Map the Meal Gap 2022: An Analysis of County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2020. Feeding America.

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<sup>ii</sup> Hayes, Clarissa, and Crystal FitzSimons. Food Research and Action Center, 2023, *The Reach of School Breakfast and Lunch During the 2021–2022 School Year*, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/school-meals-2023.pdf>. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

<sup>iii</sup> Hayes, Clarissa, and Crystal FitzSimons