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House Appropriations Committee  
House Ways and Means Committee  
February 17, 2026

House Bill 704 – *Community Eligibility Provision Expansion Program – Establishment*  
**POSITION: SUPPORT**

On behalf of The Maryland State Medical Society (MedChi), and the Maryland Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (MDAAP), we submit this letter of **support** for House Bill 704. This bill establishes the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Expansion Program within the Maryland State Department of Education. It provides state funding to eligible schools participating in the federal CEP under child nutrition programs. Specifically, the state will cover the difference between the federal paid reimbursement rate and the free reimbursement rate, ensuring full funding for school meals. Starting in Fiscal Year 2028, the Governor must allocate \$10 million annually to support the program.

The CEP is a vital federal initiative that allows schools in low-income areas to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students, eliminating the need for income-based applications. As physicians and advocates for child health, MedChi and MDAAP strongly support the expansion of CEP in Maryland schools. Proper nutrition is fundamental to children's physical health, cognitive development, and overall well-being, and the CEP is a critical tool in ensuring equitable access to nutritious meals.

Research has consistently shown that school meal programs play a crucial role in combatting food insecurity, improving diet quality, and reducing childhood obesity. Reliable access to balanced meals supports healthy growth and development, enhances immune function, and decreases the risk of chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes and hypertension.

The CEP significantly enhances child nutrition and health by ensuring all students have access to essential nutrients necessary for their growth and well-being. Participation in school meal programs has been linked to healthier body weights and a lower risk of obesity-related conditions. Additionally, consistent access to nutritious meals supports cognitive function, reducing difficulties in concentration and improving academic performance. Proper nutrition also plays a crucial role in mental health by alleviating stress, anxiety, and behavioral issues linked to food insecurity. Beyond academic benefits, CEP helps lower the prevalence of diet-related illnesses, reducing long-term healthcare costs for families and the state. Eliminating income verification barriers increases participation and removes stigma, ensuring all children receive the nutrition they need without administrative or social obstacles.

Ensuring that all children receive adequate nutrition is not just an educational issue, it is a critical public health priority. By investing in school meal programs, we invest in healthier children, stronger academic outcomes, and a more equitable future for all Maryland students. No child should have to worry about where their next meal will come from, especially in a school setting designed to foster growth and learning. Implementing CEP broadly will help ensure that every student has access to the nutrition they need to thrive. For these reasons, MedChi and MDAAP urge a favorable report.

**For more information call:**

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