



Committee of the Whole
Chair, Phil Mendelson
Public Hearing, Bill 25-35 Universal School Meals Amendment Act of 2023
November 30, 2023

Good morning Chairman Mendelson and Councilmembers. My name is Winnie Huston and I am the Food Policy Strategist for DC Greens, a Black-led multi-racial non-profit that works to advance health equity in the District by building a just and resilient food system. I'm here this morning to testify in support of the Universal School Meals Amendment Act of 2023 (USM).

The USM is a critical piece of legislation that will ensure that students in DC public, charter, and private schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program have access to breakfast, lunch, and after school snacks at no cost. Passing this bill will ensure that no child's education is compromised due to hunger.

While issues like crime tend to take center stage in the world of DC policy, hunger is a pervasive problem that sits at the root of so many other chronic issues. Hunger prevents students from learning to their full potential. Hunger forces community members into desperate situations, including criminal acts. Hunger forces families to make impossible choices between food, shelter, and essential medicines. According to a recent [assessment of hunger](#) in the DMV from the Capital Area Food Bank (CAFB), 32% of the region's population experienced food insecurity between May 2022 and April 2023. Among these individuals, 14% are experiencing low food security and 18% are experiencing very low food security. CAFB also found that the trends of *who* is most impacted by hunger have remained stubbornly consistent – food insecurity disproportionately impacts people of color, households with children, and those with lower educational attainment and incomes.

These numbers are unacceptably high. It is an embarrassment that so many families, that so many children, in the nation's capital continue to experience hunger. In DC, one in three Latinx households with children and one in five Black households with children report the household does not regularly have enough food to feed the family.¹ With most

¹ The Road Ahead: 2021 Update on Food Access & Food Security in the District of Columbia Building a more equitable, healthy, and sustainable District food system (2022, May 4)
<https://dcfoodpolicy.org/foodsecurity2020/>



pandemic-era social service programs closed or soon ending, DC's families need Universal Free School Meals now more than ever.

Research shows that students who receive free school meals benefit in many ways, including:

- Achieving higher math and reading scores
- Experiencing lower obesity rates
- Improved health due to higher consumption of fruits and vegetables
- Lowered risk of behavioral issues
- Reduced nutrition deficiencies.

During the pandemic, child hunger spiked dramatically.² To ease the problem, the federal government issued nation-wide child nutrition waivers that allowed states to offer free school meals to all students during the public health emergency. Although these waivers proved especially effective at combating childhood hunger, they were allowed to expire in June 2022, creating a hardship for many DC families. Enacting USM will benefit all students and families, but particularly those who have trouble navigating the burdensome free or reduced school meals application process; are not technically considered “low income,” but who are being pinched by the high cost of living in the District; have low literacy levels; are undocumented and are fearful of completing official documents.

Currently, eight jurisdictions (ME, VT, MA, MI, CO, NM, MN, and CA) have implemented permanent free school meals and twenty-seven other states, including MD and VA, are considering legislation.³ It is time for the District to catch up and pass Universal Free School Meals for all. This bill will reduce stress and financial burdens on families, reduce administrative burdens on school administrators, create opportunities for funding to be reinvested into other school programs, and has a relatively low price tag given that 86% of the cost of the bill will be covered by federal and local reimbursements.⁴

District students are counting on this Council to ensure that hunger and poor nutrition don't prevent them from achieving academic excellence and living their healthiest lives.

² <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/district-of-columbia>

³ Healthy School meals for all. Home - Food Research & Action Center. (n.d.). <https://frac.org/healthy-school-meals-for-all>

⁴ <https://dcfoodpolicy.org/2022/12/16/universal-free-school-meals-in-dc/>