

Testimony: Before the Committee on Education

House of Representatives – Boston, MA

Hearing: Breakfast After the Bell Programs

Tuesday, July 18, 2017

Chairwoman Chang-Diaz, Chairwoman Peisch, and distinguished members of the Committee on Education:

My name is Ana Poblacion, I am a Dietitian and Post-Doctoral Fellow at Children's HealthWatch, a nonpartisan network of pediatricians, public health researchers, and children's health and policy experts committed to improving children's health in America, and we are honored to have the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of Senate Bill 242 and House Bill 327 (An Act Regarding Breakfast in the Classroom).

Based at Boston Medical Center, our mission is to improve the health and development of young children by informing policies that address and alleviate economic hardships. As pediatricians, dietitians and public health researchers, we are concerned about the effects of food insecurity and economic hardships that families with children across the Commonwealth face. In 2015, nearly 1 in 7 children in the Commonwealth lived in families at risk of hunger because they were not able to afford enough foodⁱ.

Earlier this year, I coauthored a Report named "Ending Hunger in Our Classrooms"ⁱⁱ that addresses this subject. The report was a product of the partnership between Children's HealthWatch and the Eos Foundation. It focused on high poverty schools in Massachusetts - those with 60 percent or more of their students qualifying for free and reduced price meals. We found that nearly 300,000 children attending these schools were eligible for breakfast in 2016, but **only half of students received breakfast**.

Schools are on the front lines of alleviating childhood hunger. Our federal and state-funded school breakfast and lunch programs provide critical nourishment for all children, and especially for low-income children who may lack access to nutritious foods at home. While over two-thirds of children in high poverty schools participate in lunch, only half participate in breakfast because in most schools breakfast is offered before the start of the school day and in the cafeteria. Bus routes, busy morning schedules, and stigma/or shame about being seen eating in the cafeteria are barriers for many children. Lack of breakfast consumption leads to morning hunger for students, which may cause stomachaches and headaches resulting in lost learning time as students visit the school nurse.

Currently, the state has the opportunity to improve the health of children grades Pre-K to 12 by implementing the Breakfast After the Bell Program in schools with 60% and higher of free and reduced price-eligible children, a solution that will increase participation in breakfast and fuel students' readiness to learn.

The research is clear. Students who participate in school breakfast have:

- Lower rates of absence and tardiness
- Improved test scores
- Fewer visits to the nurse
- Improved dietary intake
- Better health outcomes, and specifically, lower body mass index
- Better psychosocial functioning, such as fewer behavior problems and less anxiety, depression and hyperactivity.

Our research on breakfast participation in Massachusetts shows that 150,000 children are missing out on these benefits. All high poverty schools can launch after the bell programs with the help with EOS Foundation. If every high poverty school in the state reached 80 percent participation in breakfast, the state would leverage over \$30 million in USDA reimbursements each year. And, we know that rate of participation is reachable. Examples of schools that implemented the After the Bell Breakfast Program increased participation rates above the 80 percent rate. For example, Hyannis West Elementary, in Hyannis, increased from 39% to 93% after they implemented a Breakfast After the Bell Program.

Working together we can eliminate morning hunger and optimize all student's potential to succeed, and this is exactly what Senate Bill 242 and House Bill 327 would do.

The Commonwealth's children clearly need breakfast daily, in order to provide them the short and longer-term nutritional foundation to develop appropriately, perform better in school, and succeed in the workforce as healthy adults.

Thank you again, Chairwoman Chang-Diaz, Chairwoman Peisch, and distinguished members of the Committee, for the opportunity to submit testimony to this Committee on behalf of Children's HealthWatch and on behalf of the children for whom we all care in our State.

Sincerely,



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ⁱ Feeding America. Map the Meal Gap: Massachusetts 2015. Available from:
<http://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2015/child/massachusetts>

ⁱⁱ Bovell A, Poblacion A. Ending Hunger in Our Classrooms. Expanding "After the Bell" Breakfast Programs for Massachusetts Students. Children's HealthWatch & EOS Foundation. 2017.