

**Testimony of
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Subcommittee on Food and Nutrition, Specialty Crops, Organics, and Research
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
U.S. Senate
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"Keeping Kids Learning in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program"

Chairman Fetterman, Ranking Member Braun, Members of the Subcommittee, I am Evora Nichole Taylor, Director of Food and Nutrition for Chichester School District in Upper Chichester, Pennsylvania. I am also Chair of the Public Policy and Legislation Committee of the School Nutrition Association, but today I will speak on behalf of Chichester School District.

I want to thank you for this opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today and share my experience and insights on the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, Community Eligibility Provision and the benefits of offering free school meals to all students as part of their education.

Chichester School District, located about 30 minutes outside of Philadelphia, serves just over 3,000 students at four elementary schools, one middle and one high school. Our community is made up of hard-working families and many of them struggle to put food on the table, particularly given high food costs.

Chichester's Food and Nutrition team takes great pride in supporting local families and their students' success by offering delicious, nutritious school breakfasts and lunches each day. Our small but mighty 33-member team prepares and serves nearly 111,000 breakfasts and 292,000 lunches each year.

In 2021, our district enrolled in the federal Community Eligibility Provision, or CEP, which allows all our students to benefit from free school breakfast and lunch without having to complete the cumbersome free and reduced-price meal application. Some of our families were either too ashamed or hesitant to submit this form, which requires them to provide the last four digits of a Social Security number or indicate if they don't have one. As a result, children in need were going without healthy meals at school.

Now, families don't have to worry about this paperwork or accruing unpaid meal debt if they can't afford school meals. In the three years before we implemented CEP, Chichester's meal debt nearly doubled from about \$8,000 to \$15,000 - for a district of just 3,000 students. Under CEP, we no longer accrue meal debt, and our district no longer has to use general funds to pay off debt at the end of each school year.

More importantly, any child who comes to school hungry knows that she can receive a healthy breakfast and lunch without having to worry about money. Let's be clear. We can't function if we don't eat. If a child has to worry about where his next meal is coming from, his upcoming math test is not going to be on his mind. There is no doubt that offering free meals to all is supporting Chichester's mission of educating our students.

A recent [School Nutrition Association survey](#) of school meal program directors nationwide revealed numerous benefits associated with free meal service. Notably, two-thirds reported free meals resulted in a more positive social-emotional cafeteria environment.

Our experience in Chichester mirrors those findings. CEP has created equity in our cafeterias. Students are no longer ashamed to take a meal now that school breakfast and lunch is provided to all students as part of their education. In fact, during a recent high school forum in our community, the moderator asked the students to name what they loved most about their school. I am pleased to state that one of our Chichester students came to the mic and said that the thing she loves the most about her school is that no student must pay for a meal.

Since we implemented CEP, my assistant and I haven't wasted countless hours every year collecting, processing and verifying free and reduced-price applications. Instead of spending our time weeding through paperwork, we can focus on serving our students, improving our menus and expanding the number of scratch prepared entrees we offer. Since we don't have to collect payment anymore, children spend less time in line and have more time to eat all the fruits and vegetables we serve them.

With free meal service, more Chichester students are eating school meals, which is great news since [research from Tufts University](#) shows school meals are the healthiest meals Americans eat today. We encourage our students to eat all the produce, whole grains and low-fat milk offered with school meals, and we have implemented several programs to nudge our picky eaters to give these healthy foods a try.

Two of our elementary schools utilize the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program to provide free, fresh produce snacks to students in the classroom. The program has introduced students to fruits and vegetables they haven't tried at home, which means they are more likely to take and eat those foods in the cafeteria. With the help of a [Pennsylvania Farm to School Grant](#), we now have terraponic gardens in three of our elementary school cafeterias, plus our high school. Students assist with planting and harvesting, and they eat more produce as a result. This spring they especially enjoyed our Easter Egg Radishes and Sakura Cherry Tomatoes.

In partnership with The Food Trust, my team is supporting healthy eating at home too. We utilize SNAP-Ed to host a four-week virtual family cooking workshop called [Cooking Beyond the Classroom](#). Each week, participating families receive a free bag of recipe ingredients and cooking utensils, and on Thursday nights we host a virtual cooking demonstration. Our families loved the Summer Salad and Apple Pie Apple Sauce.

My team is also working to make our school meals, which must meet limits on sodium, calories and fat, more appealing to students who don't always make those healthy choices when they go out to eat. We introduced scratch cooking in all our schools last year and student favorites include our Cheddar Chicken and Broccoli Casserole and Chicken Pot Pie with a Cheddar Biscuit. We've also introduced more ethnic menu options, like Jambalaya and [Asian Noodle Bowls](#), to cater to diverse student tastes.

None of these positive changes for our students come easily. School Nutrition Association's [survey](#) revealed virtually all school meal programs are struggling with rising costs. It's not only the cost of food - it's also the cost of materials, equipment and maintenance. Last year, our program saw a 37 percent increase in repair costs alone. I join my colleagues nationwide in urging Congress to increase federal reimbursements for school meals to help us manage high costs.

We could also utilize additional funds to boost wages to compete with local businesses for employees and to provide culinary training for new staff. Chichester is among the more than 90 percent of school meal programs that [report](#) challenges with staff shortages. I currently have 18 staff vacancies – for a staff of 33. We're a small program, so we don't have an HR team, accounts payable, a procurement

specialist or menu planner - it's me and my assistant managing everything. But often, I'm a backup cook or cafeteria manager when we have staff out sick.

Minimizing paperwork and regulatory burdens through programs like CEP is critical for understaffed school meal programs, especially as we work toward USDA's recently released long term nutrition standards.

In closing, I appreciate the Subcommittee's support for the important work we do to ensure all of America's students are nourished and ready to learn each day. I thank Chairman Fetterman for his introduction of the Nutrition Red Tape Reduction Act and School Hunger Elimination Act, as well as his support for the Universal School Meal Programs Act to expand access to free, healthy school meals. I urge the Subcommittee members to support this legislation and to boost federal school meal reimbursements to sustain critical school meal programs. I'd be happy to answer any questions.