



As the President of School Nutrition Association of Connecticut (SNACT), which is the professional organization representing Connecticut's school nutrition professionals, I am contacting you concerning **Senate Bill 36, AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL LUNCH DEBT.**

Connecticut's school nutrition professionals are passionate about ensuring students have access to healthy and nutritious school meals. When the pandemic forced schools to close their doors nationwide, we mobilized immediately to ensure children had access to school meals. Despite all of the challenges we faced we continue to do so on a daily basis. Our dedication to feeding children has never been more essential.

It is our mission and goal to serve every child breakfast and lunch daily. We would never want a child to go hungry or feel any shame during mealtime. We foster a supportive and stress free environment for students to have a nutritious meal without anxiety or discrimination. As school nutrition professionals, we work hard to connect all families who are in need of assistance with proper information and applications for meal assistance to ensure that those families who do qualify for benefits receive them. Our schools are consistently working to minimize any stigma that may be associated with having a negative balance and/or qualifying for free or reduced price meals. Our goal is to attempt to remove barriers for all students while ensuring strict confidentiality.

Many school districts in Connecticut have students who owe money for all different reasons. We anticipate this bill could increase the number and amount of unpaid balances. For many school meal programs, unpaid school meal debt can accumulate to create a significant problem. To give a sense of the economic impact, a 2017 SNACT survey of 44 Connecticut School Food Service Directors revealed that unpaid balances in Connecticut Schools ranged from just under \$1,000 to \$90,000 per district. 91% of districts reported they had unpaid balances. 56% reported that the balance was significant relative to the size of their districts.

Experience in other states that have placed restrictions on debt collection have shown that, anecdotally, unpaid meal debts have significantly risen after such legislation has been introduced. We also believe that anticipating 3rd party philanthropic funds can be unreliable and although warrants merit, should not be the sole consideration of funding.

Due to COVID-19 rules and regulations this past year have put tremendous financial strain on most food service programs. A survey of Food Service Directors done in September 2020 showed

districts had a 50%-75% decrease in participation and expectation of significant financial loss for the 2020-2021 school year. Food service program losses at the end of the year are incurred to the district level and are covered by the Board of Education.

As districts transition into the 2021-2022 school year, we foresee an increase in meal charges as parents and guardians adapt from free meals for all to the return of having to pay for school meals. We anticipate it will take time for families as well as food service programs to fully recover from the full effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Restricting the ability to collect unpaid meal charges will place an additional financial burden on an already stressed system. We would like clarification and the intent of the proposed language starting on Line 30 stating *“(2) a declaration of the right for any child to purchase a meal, which meal may exclude any a la cart items or be limited to one meal daily”*. We also recommend that a fiscal analysis be completed prior to moving forward so that the extent of the effect of this bill on already strained Board of Education and municipal budgets can be determined.

An alternative solution, rather than to place restrictions on debt collection limiting a district’s ability to collect unpaid debts, is to offer all students meals at no charge as an integral part of the educational experience. The National SNA is proposing to permanently expand the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs to offer all students meals at no charge, and we would welcome Connecticut to also explore funding our meal programs to eliminate the reduced meal and possibly even the paid priced meal requirements. 13 other States, including our neighbors in New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine have already done away with reduced meal pricing and provided offsetting funds to district meal programs to make up for the payments that are no longer required by parents.

As the nation recovers, continuing to provide school meals at no charge will ensure no child goes hungry during the school day, experiences shame or accrued unpaid meal debt, and will remove a significant burden on families and school district budgets. Offering healthy school meals to all students at no charge will eliminate the costly, time-consuming meal application and verification process and streamline paperwork and reporting requirements. Parents won’t have to worry about complicated meal applications, and school nutrition professionals can focus on nourishing students.

Thank you,  
Erica Biagetti  
President, School Nutrition Association of Connecticut  
Director of Dining Services for Guilford Public Schools