



Education Advocate

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State Must Fix Problem that Blocks Use of Universal Free Lunch Program

Baltimore City Schools Makes Logical, Tough Decision to Protect Existing Program Funding

Baltimore City Schools recently had to decline participation in a federal program that would provide free lunch to all students because participating would pose a significant risk of losing tens of millions in state aid. A loss of this magnitude would affect City Schools' core mission of educating its students. Given the controversy of this decision, we explain what the unintended consequence of participation in the program would have meant. The state education funding formula rightly delivers additional aid to school systems based on the number of children who come from families with low-incomes. These children need and deserve additional support such as summer school, after-school programs, tutoring, etc., which the formula funds. The Free and Reduced Meals (FARMs) forms document the number of children in this need category and school systems then receive additional annual funding for those types of programs. Baltimore City Schools receives over \$320 m. in this state aid category.

Currently, qualifying parents turn in the forms and their children get free lunch --- which 84% of city students already receive (90%+ in elementary grades). The proposed universal free lunch program (City Schools already provides universal free breakfast) could certainly benefit those children not income-eligible for free lunch as well as any students (mostly at high school level) who don't turn in a form. But if the forms no longer had to be turned in to get a free lunch, wouldn't we expect the number of forms turned in to drop drastically? Even a 3% drop in turned-in forms would take over \$10 m. from Baltimore schools.

The connection between the FARMs forms turn-in rate and state funding is likely the reason that no other counties (with lower free lunch participation) pursued implementing the universal free lunch program (even though it would benefit a substantially larger percentage of their families). City schools should be credited with making the attempt, but unless the state is willing to hold state aid steady, how can they risk losing millions of state resources needed to ensure a quality education for every student?

The recent Baltimore Sun editorial ([More on the Menu, Aug. 27](#)) was absolutely correct that "State officials ought to have been able to come up with a modified formula or some other work-around that would have allowed the city school system to take advantage of the federal [universal free lunch]...program". But the conclusion that City Schools was somehow to blame for not being able to opt into the program is off base. Had it done so, the system stood to lose tens of millions of state aid that could deprive all city schoolchildren of needed staff and resources. This is much

In This Issue

[Baltimore Schools Makes Tough Decision](#)

[New Goals for Transform Baltimore!](#)

Get Involved in your school's design process!

Do you live in Baltimore City? Is one of your neighborhood schools in the first year of the 21st Century Buildings plan? [Click here](#) to check out the list of schools beginning design and for more information on how to get involved.



more than a "paperwork problem". If leaders want this program implemented in Baltimore, state law would have to be changed to ensure that City Schools would not lose state education aid. Without such a commitment from state leaders, Baltimore City can not risk the loss of millions of dollars in program funding.

In the meantime, the important goal of ensuring that all students have access to healthy, free/affordable meals must be pursued by continuing to improve the quality of the meals and a vigorous sign-up campaign for young people in the middle and high school grades whose families qualify for free lunch but do not turn in FARMs forms.

Updated Goals for *Transform Baltimore: Build Schools. Build Neighborhoods.* Campaign

Over the past 2 years, the ACLU has worked with all our coalition allies in the Transform Baltimore campaign which focused on promoting an alternative financing strategy to rebuild all City schools. Now the campaign celebrates our shared success with the passage of the \$1 billion school construction legislation! Since the bill has passed, the campaign is putting forth an updated set of goals to maximize the impact of the program and guide our future work together.

- * Ensure the nearly \$1 billion to be financed for the 21st Century School Construction Program is spent in a fiscally responsible and cost-effective way to achieve the best outcome for the students of Baltimore
- * Ensure that the process for the 21st Century School Construction program is open and transparent, with regular public progress reports and Q&A sessions.
- * Ensure that Baltimore City residents, businesses and organizations serving the community are engaged in the school design process.
- * Collaborate with community revitalization advocates to coordinate public and private investment with the school construction program for the best community outcomes - which in turn, increase community support for schools.
- * Maximize employment and construction training opportunities for City residents and BCPS students.
- * Develop a comprehensive financing plan to ensure that 21st Century School Buildings are provided in every Baltimore City neighborhood (Phase II funding).


To stay involved and informed about the progress of the campaign, check the www.TransformBaltimore.org website regularly. We will post meeting times for schools getting new/renovated buildings, the latest analyses of the Building Program, and upcoming actions with the Baltimore Education Coalition and other partners. If your organization hasn't yet joined the campaign, email us at transform.bmore@gmail.com or call Frank Patinella at 410-889-8550, ext. 123.


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