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Rep. Smola Support Student Nutrition Bill

BOSTON – Representative Todd M. Smola (R-Warren, Ranking Member, Committee on Ways & Means) recently supported a school nutrition bill that will expand student access to free meals while eliminating “meal shaming” policies that penalize students who are unable to pay.

House Bill 3999, *An Act promoting student nutrition*, was enacted on a unanimous vote of 157-0 in the House of Representatives on October 6. The bill, which has also passed the Senate, is now on Governor Charlie Baker’s desk for his review and signature.

House Bill 3999 requires individual schools and school districts where at least 50 percent of the students are considered low-income to participate in the federal program that provides universal free school breakfast and lunch to all students. Representative Smola noted that the bill allows school districts to apply for a waiver if participating in the program will result in a financial hardship.

The bill directs school districts participating in the national school lunch program to maximize federal revenues while minimizing debt on students’ families. It also requires the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to establish protocols to assist school districts in meeting these goals.

According to Representative Smola, House Bill 3999 also requires DESE to provide guidance to school superintendents for notifying a parent or guardian about a student’s unpaid meal debt. School districts will have 30 days from the date the notification is issued to determine if the student is eligible for free or reduced-price meals, during which time students cannot be denied access to a school meal.

Representative Smola said House Bill 3999 offers strong protections to ensure that students are not punished if they are unable to pay for a school meal or owe money for a previously-served meal. The bill does this by prohibiting schools from:

- taking any action that publicly identifies a student who owes money for meals;
- serving a student with unpaid meal debt an alternative meal that is not available to all students;
- denying a meal to a student as a form of behavioral discipline or punishment;
- disposing of an already served meal because the student is unable to pay for the meal or has unresolved meal debt;
- blocking a student or their siblings from participating in extracurricular activities, field trips or school events because of the student's unresolved meal debt;
- preventing a student from graduating or blocking the release of a student's grades, official transcripts, or report cards solely because of unresolved meal debt; or
- requiring a parent or guardian to pay fees or costs for meals previously served to the student in excess of the actual amounts owed.

For additional information please contact Representative Smola at Todd.Smola@mahouse.gov or (617)722-2100.

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