

July 18, 2017

Re: Senate Bill 242 and House Bill 327

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

Thank you for the opportunity to testify at yesterday's hearing. After giving my testimony, I was asked, "Why do we need this legislation?" I regret that I was not well prepared to answer your question at that time. However, having further consulted with my district's School Nutrition Director I want to provide a clear answer to that question, and to make the case for why it is important for you to pass this legislation.

Why do we need Senate Bill 242 and House Bill 327?

There are two reasons:

1. Staff turnover of those who support after the bell, breakfast in the classroom (BIC): At the superintendent, principal, and nutrition director levels, there is no guarantee that the forward progress Massachusetts has made to offer students breakfast after the bell will continue after strong supporters like myself leave, voluntarily or otherwise.
2. Too many of these same stakeholders (superintendents, principals, and nutrition directors) are not currently operating the program. This legislation will nudge them to push past their perceived fears associated with mess in the classroom etc., and do what is in the best interest of children.

The history of BIC in Salem highlights these points. Our Nutrition Director Deb Jeffers and her team introduced BIC into four schools in SY13/14 under the approval of my predecessor Superintendent Stephen Russell. When I came into the district at the end of SY14/15, I continued operation of the program, without giving it my full attention. The district was in transition, I needed to hire new principals for four schools – all BIC schools, I needed to put together my Central Office team, I needed to develop my strategic plan for the district, the list goes on. BIC was secondary, and honestly, if my principal team or teachers were strongly opposed to it, I would have let it go. As an incoming Superintendent I wouldn't have wanted to ruffle feathers or risk losing the opportunity to build cohesion among my team – you can appreciate how important that cohesion is. Fortunately, Deb Jeffers, our Nutrition Director, and her team advocated to me, and the incoming principals, for the continuation of BIC at each of the four schools (most of which had a large teacher turnover as well). She and her team invested the time to re-launch BIC at each school. If Deb wasn't there, or if she was too tired or less committed to take on the re-launch effort (as some Nutrition Directors may have been), over 1,000 students and families who depended on BIC would have lost it. A lot goes into launching and operating a successful BIC program. It requires conversations with all school building stakeholders: principals, teachers, cafeteria staff, and custodians. It requires setting up systems for food purchasing, classroom delivery, for custodial cleanup, and for morning classroom time. It requires commitment at many levels, and if one key person leaves (i.e., superintendent, principal, nutrition director), there is currently no guarantee that the program will continue. This legislation would be that needed guarantee.

This brings me to my second point which is the need that some superintendents, principals, and nutrition directors, as well as teachers, need to be nudged to push past their perceived fears associated with breakfast in the classroom. People will say that they fear:

- Crumbs, spills, and mess
- Loss of learning time
- Adding one more thing to the list of teacher responsibilities

These are valid concerns. However, over 50 classrooms in Salem, and over 1,000 classrooms across the state have proven that it's possible to work through these concerns to do what's best for children. Salem will expand the Community Eligibility Program to two additional schools in the upcoming SY17/18. These are our two most affluent schools, and I anticipate pushback from some in the school buildings who will suggest that the students at these schools don't need the program, despite the broader demographics of the city, which indicate that they do. If these school leaders and staff teams aren't nudged to implement the program, they won't. I am going to have to nudge folks that I depend on. I am going to have to nudge good educators that are important to positive collaboration and cohesion in my district. I am going to have to nudge these folks past their perceived fears. Change is hard, and taking on yet another thing in a high-poverty school community is harder still. But if we don't nudge the principals and teachers at these two schools in Salem, hundreds of children who need the program will remain in a cycle of struggle unnecessarily.

If you don't nudge educators by passing this legislation that number is multiplied. If you don't nudge educators by passing this legislation, 150,000 children who need the BIC program will remain in a cycle of struggle unnecessarily. What's more, many more children could lose access to this program if there is a change in superintendent, principal, or nutrition director at their school/district. There is no stopgap to ensure that this program will continue. We need one.

As a Superintendent, I am on the front lines of taking legislated requirements, or mandates, and implementing them. I feel this burden acutely when I sit down with my Union Representatives and school teams. All Superintendents feel this way. However, this after the bell BIC requirement is different than the others. Many of us in high-poverty communities are already operating the program; we won't balk at this legislation's passage – we will breathe a sigh of relief. With that said, there will certainly be some who do balk, who do resent this bill's passage. You have to ask yourselves, is that noise more meddlesome to your conscience than leaving 150,000+ students without the access to the nutritious food they need. I hope you choose to do what's right for children and pass this legislation.

Respectfully yours,



Margarita Ruiz
Superintendent of Schools