

# HUNGRY CHILDREN CAN'T WAIT: UNIVERSAL FREE SCHOOL MEALS

ENSURE ALL CHILDREN HAVE CONSISTENT ACCESS TO QUALITY NUTRITION

Every day, **1 in 6 children experience food insecurity**, not knowing where their next meal will come from (Feeding America, 2022). In order to make ends meet, many families rely on school meals to provide some of the recommended nutrients needed for growing children. For years the federal government has debated whether to expand access to free school meals to all children participating in school meal programs, but unfortunately it is not the standard. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst to expand federal funding to schools by offering waivers and flexibilities to allow for universal free school meals during this crisis. Providing universal access to free school meals is a powerful tool to improve the food security of families living in or on the brink of poverty.



POSITIVELY  
IMPACT NEARLY  
30 MILLION  
CHILDREN  
EVERY DAY

## What is Food Insecurity?

A lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life.

*Feeding America*



1 in 6 children experience food insecurity every day

**Congress can, and should, pass legislation to make permanent the flexibilities that allowed free school meals to be distributed to all children nationwide during the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure stable access to quality, nutritious meals through school nutrition programs.**

## Why is this Important?

The National School Lunch Program (NLSP) has been in existence since the 1940s and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) since the 1960s. Over the decades, both have grown in notoriety and participation, as solid and dependable programs providing excellent nutrition to children throughout the country. **In 2019, NSLP and SBP provided subsidized meals to 22.2 million and 11.8 million children, respectively.**

While the pandemic sparked funding for meal waivers that allowed schools to expand access, the concept of free meals is not new. Some schools already provide universal free meals through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows blanket free meals to be served if the school has a high percentage of students living in poverty; elementary schools are more likely to offer these universal free meals than middle and high schools (SNMCS-Summary Findings).

## 2019 School Meal Participation Statistics

### National School Lunch Program

- 100,000 schools provided lunch
- 29.6 million students participated
- 3 out of 4 kids received free or reduced-price lunch

### School Breakfast Program

- 90,000 schools provided lunch
- 14.8 million students participated
- 4 out of 5 kids received free or reduced-price breakfast



## Benefits of Free Meals

### Reduced Stigma on Students

Making universal free meals permanent would eliminate the need for schools to allocate time and resources towards collecting and/or covering unpaid meal fees because there would be no charge for students. Universal free meals also alleviate the personal shame associated with being denied a meal or offered one of a lesser quality when a student cannot pay. Providing universal free meals removes the stigma associated with the current fee structure that highlights students', and their families', financial situation and makes the distribution of school meals equal for all.

### Reduced Burden on School, Staff and Families

Pandemic waivers and CEP participation help reduce barriers to operating NSLP and SBP. With these options, schools can more easily provide meals to all children, regardless of household income. In addition to improving food security among students, the benefits of removing administrative barriers are reflected in both time and cost savings. Research has shown that offering free meals results in an average time saving of 68 minutes per student annually, which equates to a roughly \$29 savings in labor costs per student, per year (Cohen 2021). Making universal school meals permanent would ensure all children have consistent access to quality nutrition without having to jump through hoops to obtain it.

### Improved Academic Performance

Research shows that participation in school meal programs:

- improves behavior;
- enhances academic performance; and
- advances academic achievement.

Long-lasting, positive impacts in educational attainment are associated with meal program participation. School attendance is improved and tardiness is reduced, which is hypothesized to be due to increased access to food for low-income households and improved nutrition from meals served at schools (Cohen 2021). This increased access to quality nutrition may decrease the likelihood of illness associated with poor nutrition later in life. School breakfast participation is associated with lower Body Mass Index (BMI), lower probability of overweight and obesity, and reduced occurrence of behavioral problems, anxiety, and depression (FRAC 2021 Schools Meals Essential). Participation in school meal programs shows a positive impact on health outcomes.

**Free Meals  
Equals**

**\$29 decrease in annual  
labor costs *per student*.**



## Benefits of Free Meals (cont.)

### **Reduced Food Insecurity**

The economic impact to low-income households receiving free meals for their children is extremely evident. Based on recent census data, in 2019 NSLP lifted 661,000 children above the poverty line (Fox 2020). Meals provided at no cost allow families to save funds and increase purchasing power for other household necessities, including food, further promoting food security (Cohen 2021).

**"RESEARCH SHOWS SCHOOL MEALS CONTRIBUTE TO THE HEALTH, ATTENTIVENESS, BEHAVIOR AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF STUDENTS. ALLOWING ALL STUDENTS TO RECEIVE FREE MEALS ENSURES STUDENTS HAVE EQUAL ACCESS TO THE BENEFITS OF NUTRITIOUS SCHOOL MEALS WHILE REDUCING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATIVE COSTS."**

*School Nutrition Association*



## Perceived Barriers

### **Wasted Tax Dollars to Support Higher Income Families**

Universal school meals have been shown to have a positive effect on the test scores of middle school students –poor and non-poor – with the largest increases for non-poor students. Universal school meals are associated with increased participation in school lunch, which leads to improved student performance on both English Language Arts (ELA) and math exams for both poor and non-poor students. These findings suggest price matters for non-poor students whose families may face budget or nutritional constraints that limit academic performance. Findings for the poor – who largely experience no direct change in price – suggest that stigma plays a role in participation decisions (Maxwell School, 2019). Using estimates from the New York City Independent Budget Office (2017), Maxwell School estimated that the increased school lunch participation with universal school meals would cost the city an additional \$50 per student per year. Therefore, universal school meals are an extremely cost effective way to generate increases in math and ELA test scores among poor and non-poor students (Maxwell School, 2019).

### **Increased Costs for Taxpayers**

While the Congressional Budget Office has not calculated an estimated cost for Universal Free meals, evidence suggests that finances are offset by reduced labor costs (Cohen 2021) and furthermore, offering free meals shows a moderate decrease in lunch costs and a significant decrease for breakfast (Long, Marple & Andreyeva 2021). Finding unique ways to avoid taxpayer burden is appropriate and possible.

**HELP CHILDREN  
LEARN AND THRIVE**

- Should children have to carry the burden and stigma having to prove they are
- hungry and worthy of food? ●



## Perceived Barriers (cont.)

### Interference with Title 1 Funding

Universal school meals would not impact the amount of federal funding school districts receive. Title 1 funds are annually appropriated to each state based on census poverty data and each state's education costs. School districts then distribute these funds to individual schools based on poverty percentages through a process called "rank and serve." Utilizing NSLP data, which is based on students who qualify for free or reduced priced meals either by submitting a meal application or by direct certification due to household SNAP participation, is one option that school districts can use to rank their schools by poverty percentage to determine priority. Other options include utilizing data from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and U.S. Census data. Like with the CEP, schools could also choose to continue utilizing NSLP data by multiplying the number of students who are directly certified through SNAP participation by the 1.6 multiplier to account for the additional students who would have been certified for free and reduced-price school meals through the traditional school meal application process (FRAC, 2019).

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### POLICY RECOMMENDATION

CEP and pandemic-related waivers have shown that universal access to free school meals is possible, sustainable, and beneficial for children and their households. Consistent access to free, nutritious meals through school nutrition programs provides lifelong positive impacts on the lives of children. Offering universal meals without administrative barriers would prioritize the nutrition-related needs of children and families experiencing poverty. The current pandemic-related flexibilities are set to expire in June 2022.

**NOW IS THE TIME TO  
PERMANENTLY IMPLEMENT  
UNIVERSAL FREE MEALS FOR  
ALL CHILDREN PARTICIPATING  
IN SCHOOLS MEALS  
NATIONWIDE.**

**HUNGRY CHILDREN CAN'T WAIT.**



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