

# UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS POLICY BRIEF



Both inside and outside the classroom, adequate nutrition is essential for a child's well-being and development. However, an estimated 1.54 million U.S. students cannot afford the meals offered at school.<sup>1</sup> While many of these students rely on the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) free or reduced-price meal options, others may go hungry to the detriment of their academic success and health. Children deserve nutritious, healthy, and filling meals, no matter their family's income. Healthy, free school meals for all would give every child a chance to flourish.

## OUR CURRENT SYSTEM LEAVES KIDS HUNGRY

The USDA's current free or reduced-price meal program qualifications do not meet the needs of struggling families. Under the current regulations, a single parent with two children making \$43,000 annually makes too much to qualify for even a reduced-price lunch. With food prices soaring by 11% in 2022 and costs of living on the rise, families are struggling to make ends meet.<sup>2</sup> Families who do qualify must navigate bureaucratic application processes and share personal information with the school in order to receive reduced-price or free lunches.

Those who cannot pay add to the already \$262 million of unpaid school lunch debt.<sup>3</sup> Children from these households face stigma that leads to bullying both by peers and by the schools, who may discard already served lunches to in-debt students, mark them with stickers, or force them to complete chores. Such conditions may have acute psychological impacts on our children.

## UNIVERSAL MEALS MEAN HEALTHY KIDS

Food insecurity — which leads to poor nutrition — directly influences health and well-being throughout a child's life. For some food-insecure students, school lunches may be the only meal they receive that day. Food insecurity is specifically associated with poorer physical and mental health, lower school performance, and diminished psychosocial functioning.<sup>4</sup> Families primarily suffer from food insecurity because they lack the resources to access and purchase healthy, adequate food. Food insecure families must often face impossible decisions between keeping food on the table, purchasing medication, or paying utility bills.

The lifelong health implications of a consistently nutritious diet during childhood cannot be overstated. Science shows that children's nutrition is directly linked to healthy development and that a nutritious diet reduces a child's risk of obesity, diabetes, and developing chronic conditions such as heart disease, tooth decay, high blood pressure, and cancer later in life.<sup>5</sup> During these critical childhood years children develop lifelong food preferences. Meals provided by schools, which are often healthier than meals that low-income children receive at home, help children create good eating habits that will carry through to adulthood. In light of the USDA's recent

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updates to school meal standards, school-provided meals will contain less sodium and sugar than in the past and more whole grains. These changes will promote better brain health, improve students' capacity for learning, decrease the risk of early-onset heart disease, and keep kids feeling fuller for longer.<sup>6</sup> Under our current system, however, these healthier meals are available only to students who can afford them.

Studies show that students from low-income households who rely on free school meals for breakfast and lunch have a significantly healthier diet than those who do not.<sup>7</sup> Students who are eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches but instead bring meals and snacks from home consume significantly more saturated fat and sugar and significantly less fruit than their National School Lunch Program-participating counterparts.<sup>8</sup> In schools that offer universal meals via the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) — which allows high-poverty schools to provide free breakfast and lunch without requiring individual families to prove their eligibility — participation rates rose by an average of 6.8% for lunch and 12.1% for breakfast, allowing students who experienced difficulties with the application process or narrowly missed the subsidized meal eligibility window to access nutritious food.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, some studies suggest that, due to their higher nutritional content and ability to satisfy children's appetites, healthier school meals may lead to decreased consumption of junk food outside of school.<sup>10</sup> The Universal School Meals Program Act also ensures that children have access to breakfast, lunch, snacks, and dinner year round, which means no student in poverty misses a meal. Universal school meals are a clear and unequivocal win for students, schools, and the health of America's children.

## **BENEFITS BEYOND THE CAFETERIA**

Beyond physical health, research shows that access to consistent, healthy meals benefits children academically. Meals high in sugar disrupt academic performance, learning and memory. A healthy, balanced diet consistent with USDA's new guidelines, improves academic performance and increases children's brain capacity.<sup>11</sup> Universal school meals may also help increase attendance by decreasing illness among the now healthier students.<sup>12</sup> School meal programs are critical supports, filling the gaps and fighting hunger and poor nutrition when low-income families struggle to put food on the table.

Beyond healthier and happier students, school administrators themselves benefit from universal school meal programs, which allow students access to meals without applications. Participating schools see decreased administrative burdens and costs associated with their meal programs.

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Rather than spending their time processing applications and paperwork, nutrition staff can instead focus on their menus, purchasing, and interacting with students.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the elimination of student meal debt means that schools no longer grapple with collection and monitoring of a financial liability. Faculty can spend their days helping students stay healthy rather than navigating bureaucracy and chasing down debts.

### **PROVEN SUCCESS: THE COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION**

The successes of universal school meals are well-documented by the triumphs of the 40,235 schools participating in the The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which has allowed us a glimpse into the effects of universal meal programs.<sup>14</sup> The CEP enables schools with high rates of poverty to offer students free breakfast and lunch without requiring individual families to apply and prove their eligibility, giving us a glimpse into what free school meals could look like for students. The CEP reimburses schools who opt to participate in this program using a formula, which is calculated based on how many students are eligible for these benefits. Schools are eligible for CEP if their student population has at least 40% "Identified Students," as determined through automatic eligibility for free lunches, such as families receiving SNAP benefits. The CEP provides insight into the results of universal school meal programs in participating schools.

Universal school meal programs eliminate all stigma for students who receive subsidized lunches or have accrued lunch debt. These children are then freed from the emotional and psychological burden — not to mention the bullying — that often comes with receiving free lunches. For low-income students attending CEP schools, this impact is both profound and measurable. Research shows that in their third year of CEP participation, schools saw a 15% decline in suspensions, particularly among students who previously received subsidized lunches. Students who receive subsidized lunches are suspended almost twice as much as their peers.<sup>15</sup>

For 19.9 million students attending CEP schools, universal school meals mean that no matter their income level they are guaranteed a nutritious and filling meal.<sup>16</sup> For students who have school meal debt, this means that they are no longer subject to humiliating and unhealthy "cheese sandwich policies." These policies require that students be served a cold and less nutritious meal, like a cheese or peanut butter sandwich, if they have outstanding meal debts. Additionally, research shows that roughly 4% of families already participating in universal school meals via CEP became food secure as a result of the program.<sup>17</sup> With more funds available for food at home, students may have access to nutritious schools both inside and outside of school.

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## NEXT STEPS: LEGISLATION THAT GETS US THERE

As pandemic-era benefits sunset throughout 2023, Congress has a unique opportunity to build on the crucial success we've seen in recent years. Legislation assisting schools to provide school meals and expanding programs play a crucial role in keeping food on the tables of children in the country's low-income households. While nine states have introduced universal free school meals in recent years, it's up to Congress to deliver for all children across the country.

**The Helping Schools Feed Kids Act of 2023**, introduced by Reps. Abigail Spanberger (D-VA) and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA), maintains the increased pandemic-era reimbursement rates for free and reduced-price school breakfast and lunch through the 2024 school year. This bipartisan bill helps schools support students through access to meals during the school day.

Additionally, Rep. Jim McGovern (D-MA) has introduced the **Healthy Meals Help Kids Learn Act of 2023**, which permanently raises the reimbursement rate to 45 cents for free and reduced-price lunch and 28 cents for breakfast with annual adjustments. Higher reimbursement rates mean more meals for more students and support for schools that want to keep food on every child's plate but may not have the means to without assistance. As costs remain high, it remains critical to support schools in providing accessible meals for children through legislation such as the Health Meals Help Kids Learn Act of 2023.

Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) have introduced the **Universal School Meals Act of 2023**. Under this legislation, students would be provided with free breakfast, lunch, dinner, and a snack each day, without students needing to prove their eligibility. This bill would reimburse schools for school meal debt, and increase reimbursement rates for school meals. The Universal School Meals Act also reduces the practices that humiliate students with school meal debt, such as providing them cheese or peanut butter sandwiches instead of what is being served to everyone else. This bill expands students' access to food throughout the day, supporting the fundamental right of children to have consistent and nutritious meals.

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## CONCLUSION

Every child deserves nutritious, filling meals that help them grow both physically and academically. Universal school meals provide a lifeline to nutritious food that sets students up for a lifetime of healthier eating and physical health. For children in poverty, these meals may be the only nutritious food they eat each day. Policymakers must enact legislation that ensures that every child, no matter their circumstances, has the nutrition they need to grow and thrive.

## FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT

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## ENDNOTES

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