

NOURISHING FUTURES: ADVOCATING FOR UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS



As Summer gives way to Fall, children all over the country are making their way back to school. It goes without saying that kids who enjoy good health and eat nutritious food feel better and are therefore able to better concentrate and perform better in the classroom.

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 nourishing food they eat each day. This month, we will be encouraging our policymakers to support legislation that ensures every child has the nutritional support they need to grow and thrive.

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. 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.

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. 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.

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. 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.

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 improves academic performance and increases children's brain capacity.

Universal school meal programs also eliminate all stigma for students who receive subsidized lunches or have accrued lunch debt. These children are freed from the emotional and

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psychological burden that often comes with receiving free lunches. Research shows that after participating in such programs, schools saw a 15% decline in suspensions, particularly among students who previously received subsidized lunches.

Additionally, research shows that roughly 4% of families participating in universal school meals programs became **food secure** as a result of the program. 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.

There is currently legislation in the U.S. Congress that would achieve this goal if enacted:

Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) have introduced ***S. 1568 and H.R. 3204, 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.

Take Action:

This month, we will join First Focus staff and other Ambassadors in reaching out to our Representatives and Senators to urge their support for the bills above. Details for each request are below.

1. ***S. 1568, the Universal School Meals Act of 2023*** introduced by Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT): please check **here** to see if both of your Senators have already cosponsored this bill. If they have, please thank them. If they have not yet added their name as a supporter, please email **your Senators** and urge that they cosponsor the bill. Pull from the information above for why you are asking them to take this action and request a response.
2. ***H.R. 3204, the Universal School Meals Act of 2023*** introduced by Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN): please check **here** to see if your Representative has already cosponsored this bill. If they have, please thank them. If they have not yet added their name as a supporter, please email **your Rep** and urge that they cosponsor the bill. Pull from the information above for why you are asking them to take this action and request a response.

As always, please let the First Focus team know what you hear from your elected officials and thank you for your partnership.