

Simply Fed: A Universal Free School Meal Advocacy Proposal

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“ By ensuring all students have access to school meals at no cost, more children could receive the nutrition they need at school – helping them to thrive.

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Public Health Impact: Child Nutrition

The removal of universal school meal waivers threatens to leave children without the most nutritious meal of the day.



THE TIME IS NOW. COVID-19 HAS WORSENERD OUR ALREADY PRESSING HUNGER CRISIS, ESPECIALLY FOR CHILDREN. WE MUST ADVOCATE FOR LEGISLATION THAT PROVIDES A SOLUTION THAT LASTS FAR BEYOND THE PANDEMIC.



The Issue

In the coming weeks as children return to school after summer break, most Ohio students will not be able to automatically get a free school lunch as has been the case for the last two years during the pandemic. This issue will affect families throughout our communities.

The Keep Kids Fed Act recently passed by Congress does not continue the free lunch program at schools regardless of incomes, but it does expand those eligible for free lunches and increases the reimbursement rate for schools.

The free lunch program or child nutrition waivers were originally established to relieve food insecurity at the beginning of the pandemic when children could not receive meals at school because of the lockdowns. The waivers increased federal reimbursements for lunch programs and allowed schools to omit eligibility requirements for free and reduced-price meals. This meant that all children were fed, no questions asked. Congress has decided not to extend the program.

A US Department of Agriculture survey found that 90% of schools took advantage of the increased funding and waivers to provide free meals to students regardless of income. The removal of increased funding and waivers has caused the schools to require the submission of free/reduced lunch applications which will eliminate the benefit for many that otherwise may be unable to have a nutritious lunch during the school day. Note that some schools are able to provide free lunch to all students under the USDA Community Eligibility Provision which is provided through the Ohio Department of Education. This provision helps schools and districts in high poverty communities meet eligibility to serve no-cost lunches and breakfasts to all their students.

Kathleen Housman, child nutrition supervisor for Fairborn City Schools in Fairborn, Ohio says that during the last two years, when families didn't have to fill out paperwork to qualify for a free lunch, the district served 66% more children at breakfast and 30% more children at lunch than it did prior to the pandemic waivers.

Normally, free-and-reduced lunch eligibility is determined by income criteria based on household size. Families were required to fill out forms to receive the benefit, but that paperwork was waived during the pandemic.

Brigette Hires, director of the Office of Nutrition at the Ohio Department of Education, said the Department of Agriculture was given authority to pass more waivers for kids, but those have not yet been issued. Until they are issued, it's premature to talk about the impact, she said.

“This is something that frankly ought to be easy in America,” said Michigan Senator Debbie Stabenow, a Democrat who co-led the effort to extend the waivers as chair of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry. “This is about feeding children, making sure children don’t go to school hungry so they can be successful.”

Shelley McGuire, an infant child nutritionist at University of Idaho, has affirmed the value of school breakfast and lunch programs in her statement “We do know that these school breakfast and lunch programs have become absolutely critical for child nutrition in the United States. They’re really part of the fabric of how kids are fed.” McGuire said this is especially true for low-income families, who have to stretch every dollar.

Many children get their best nutrition from school meals. The way the funding for all students in a school to get free meals is set up, makes the situation a red versus blue, city versus suburban and urban contest to vie for the limited funds earmarked for schools in high poverty areas, but the issue is that in reality, there are hungry children everywhere.

The issue has been complex, and is even more so now, since families are used to the meals and the money they had budgeted for lunch being freed up for other things like utilities or essentials. Removing this benefit before families are fully recovered from the effects of the pandemic will intensify disparities and reduce health outcomes.

Removing such a staple in child nutrition comes at a cost and is a gamble at a particularly delicate time in children’s lives. Childhood is the time where we know nutrition impacts their current behavior, their growth, and their development.

Fortunately, states like California and Maine aren’t waiting for a federal decision on extending the free lunch program. They have decided to fund school meals for all their students.

The Solution is Clear.

Universal school meals – school meals available at no-cost to every student – have benefits that extend far beyond the meal table. Research shows when a child is well fed, they perform better in school, are at lower risk for obesity, and adjust to social situations better. Additionally, by making meal access universal, we help remove stigma around economic status and family situation – creating a more equitable and just educational environment.



Making The Case

Universal free school meal policy has both a business case and a moral case, and it makes sense whether you see it from the perspective of the child, parent, teacher, or taxpayers/society as a whole. Leaving aside the moral case, giving a free, healthy hot lunch to all children will improve the health and education outcomes of a whole generation.

Studies have shown that students in free meal pilot sites are on average two months ahead of their peers elsewhere. While improvements do seem to be stronger in children from economically disadvantaged families, we know that all children benefit from them. Only 1% of packed lunches meet the nutritional levels of the average hot school lunch, therefore, if we want across-the-board educational and health outcomes, free school meals seem to be a tremendous first step. The addition of universal free school breakfasts would be an asset in schools where children often arrive to school too hungry to learn. In pilot studies, schools that participated in the universal free meal programs reported improved child concentration and behavior in school. Grades went up. Children ate more vegetables. If we believe in education, don't we also want to make sure children make the most of their time?

Packed lunches are not the answer. Despite the large amount of money parents currently spend on packed lunches, only 1% of them meet nutritional standards. For one in four children, the only hot meal they receive is the meal provided at school. And the flip side of poor nutrition is obesity – an incredible 20% of children between the ages of four and five are already in this category. If we make sure more children get a hot, healthy meal at lunchtime, and optimally breakfast as well, we will reduce the amount of healthcare dollars we spend each year on diet-related illnesses. We also have a large subsection of people in this country who earn just above the eligibility threshold for free school meals. Universal free school meals would also ease their financial burden.

Answers to Potential Questions/Concerns:

What are universal school meals/school meals for all? Healthy school meals for all, or universal school meals, would allow every student who wants or needs a school breakfast or lunch to receive it, at no cost to their family. The cost would be covered by the existing National School Lunch Program federal reimbursement combined with a supplemental state reimbursement.

Would this impact eligibility for other programs such as the Summer Food Service Program? The short answer is no. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSPP) provides federal reimbursements for serving children and teens during the summer. Eligibility for the service is determined in a few ways at the federal level, and these would not be changed by schools serving school meals for all statewide. In many communities, sites can serve meals to anyone 18 or under because of the numbers of free or reduced-price eligible students that live nearby.

WHY SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL?

Today in Franklin County, Ohio - 1 in 5 households with children are food insecure, with black and Latinx families disproportionately impacted. COVID-19 has shed light on the state of hunger in our state and in our nation.

However, we know this was always a crisis. Too many people in our state were struggling to meet their most basic of human needs – food – even before this pandemic. And kids have always been one of the groups most impacted.

Since the 1940s, child nutrition programs have been tasked with feeding as many children that are in need as possible while doing so with limited resources. For this reason, federally- reimbursed meals divide children into tiers – some kids pay full price, some kids pay reduced, and some kids receive free meals.

We choose to imagine a new system. One without paperwork to show your income; one without meal debt; one without stigma. One that is equitable. One where the focus is squarely on feeding kids quality school meals.

Healthy school meals for all is a necessary step toward ending hunger in our state.



Why are we focusing on school meals? In Franklin County, 1 in 5 households with children are food insecure, with black and Latinx families disproportionately impacted. School meals are a critical source of nutrition for many children, helping them learn and be active in the short term, and thrive academically, physically, and emotionally in the long term. School meals can also establish lifelong healthy eating habits that can reduce the cases and severity of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and obesity, along with the cost associated with these diseases.

School meals can account for over half of a child's daily calories. These are children who might not otherwise have reliable access to healthy food at home. But right now, too many children who could benefit from school meals aren't eating them. While there are many reasons for this, two of the biggest barriers that stop children from participating in school meals are the cost of purchasing meals and the stigma of being singled out as needing a free or reduced-price school meal.

Universal school meals eliminate financial barriers by ensuring any child can receive a meal, regardless of income, removing stigma and shame. No student is required to pay fees before entering their classroom to learn or seeing the school nurse or guidance counselor. The same should apply to the fundamental need for food.

How would this program work in Ohio? Under a statewide universal school meals system, all schools in Ohio would provide free meals to all students. The federal government would continue to provide per-meal reimbursements to schools based on their free/reduced/paid tiers, and the state would make up the additional cost of meals.

How is this different from how school meals operate normally? School meals are served at different price tiers: free, reduced-price, and full price. Households qualify for free or reduced-price through an application or through participation in other federal assistance programs. For families with household earnings less than 130 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) receive meals for free. Households above 130 percent but below 185 percent FPL receive meals at a reduced-price fee (\$.30 for breakfast and \$.40 for lunch), and all other students must pay full price (which varies by school district).

Currently, schools can opt into serving universal free meals by adopting one of several federal provisions, most commonly the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) or Provision II. Only schools and districts with a demonstrated level of need can adopt CEP, while all schools are eligible to participate in Provision II. The details of each are different, but in both cases, the local district is often still required to cover a portion of the cost of meals except in the case of the highest need districts. This can make it financially challenging or prohibitive for districts to adopt universal meals without additional resources.

What about schools that already have universal free lunch? Adopting a statewide universal school meals policy would benefit these communities in several ways. First, statewide universal school meals would guarantee that the district will continue to be able to provide universal school meals even if demographics change. CEP requires a school or group of schools to meet a certain threshold of need before being able to participate. Once CEP is adopted, schools may continue to serve universal school meals for at least four years, at which time they must still meet that threshold. Statewide universal school meals would ensure schools can always serve meals to all students. Second, reimbursement for CEP varies based on the demonstrated level of need in the community. In some communities, schools are only being reimbursed at the free rate for 65-70% of the meals served. All additional meals are reimbursed at the much lower paid rate. A state reimbursement would fill that gap, allowing these schools to focus on maintaining or improving meal quality instead of keeping costs low.

Wouldn't this program cover families who can afford to pay for school meals? My community doesn't need universal school meals. Universal means universal. There are families living with food insecurity in every single community in Ohio. Whether it is a long-term condition or an acute need during a crisis that a family has never experienced before, school meals are a critical resource to a family that is struggling to put food on the table. We don't require some students to pay for their education at public schools, or books, or visits to the school nurse based on their family's income – all things, like food, that are critical to education. Why should school meals be any different? Furthermore, over 1 in 4 food insecure children live in households that do not qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The high cost of living leaves many families in a precarious state: they earn too much to receive federal assistance from programs such as SNAP, but too little to eat full and healthy diets. Healthy school meals for all would ensure that at least school-aged children can rely on school meals.

Challenges of the Existing System

Application Requirements. This puts a considerable burden on schools, which are short-staffed already, and on parents, particularly those who are immigrants. At the beginning of each year, there are many families that don't realize they need to fill out an application, so their children attend school and fall through the cracks, either not getting meals at all or racking up meal debt until their applications get processed.

Meal Debts. Meal debts can add up to unimaginable amounts for families with multiple children and often times children cannot graduate or get their diplomas until the debts have been paid. For those that don't allow charging, the children are given a cheese sandwich or peanut butter crackers (while being forced to return the tray they had picked up going through the line, in full view of all the other students).

Stigma. Students with free lunch have to get a standard issue lunch tray. Those without free lunch often are able to pick from a larger variety of items including Caesar salads and pizza. This clearly delineates which students have free lunch and those that do not. A standard method of serving meals to all children would prevent the stigma of having to get the "free lunch tray." There is also great concern about if there is money on a student's account. If they have ran out of funds before and had to make the walk of shame with a pack of peanut butter and crackers, they may be too scared to chance it again. These students make excuses not to eat lunch and often sit in the library or similar area during mealtimes to avoid the risk.

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