

**Q: What are healthy school meals for all?**

A: Healthy school meals for all allow all enrolled children in a school that operates the National School Lunch Program or School Breakfast Program to receive free breakfast and free lunch, regardless of their family's income. Healthy school meals for all also negates the need for families to apply or schools to verify eligibility for the programs.

**Q: What are the benefits of healthy school meals for all?**

A: Healthy school meals for all:

- ensures that all students get two free, healthy meals every school day, giving children the tools they need to succeed in school
- removes stigma of children participating in the program
- provides equitable access to healthy meals and levels the playing field
- reduces burdens on families
- ensures that children who might be on the edges of eligibility, or children who are experiencing homelessness, have recently immigrated, have caregivers who may struggle with administrative paperwork, or are in foster care do not fall through the cracks
- reduces administrative burden on school food service staff by streamlining and simplifying the program
- provides a steady budget for school food service programs so they may remain fiscally solvent
- eliminates unpaid meal balances
- removes draconian measures schools may take to feed children who cannot pay
- allows programs to focus on their primary function: feeding children healthy meals
- negates the need to stand in line to pay for meals, allowing children more time to eat and socialize
- solves the issue of figuring out how to have children pay if their meal is served in the classroom or are remote learning
- takes pressure off school food service programs to increase revenue by serving foods that may be lower in nutritional quality

In addition, data from the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) found that serving free meals to all kids improved attendance rates, improved grade promotion, and increased participation in school lunch. It is reasonable to assume that healthy school meals for all could have the same positive impact.

**Q: How are healthy school meals for all different than the CEP?**

A: Under healthy school meals for all school food programs would get reimbursed at the free rate for all children who eat lunch or breakfast at schools. Under CEP, schools with 40 percent or more of students who are directly certified through programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or Medicaid can serve breakfast and lunch for free to the entire school or district. With CEP, schools are reimbursed according to the percentage of directly certified children.

**Q: Why not just expand CEP to all schools?**

A: CEP is reimbursed on what is called a multiplier: the higher the percent of directly certified children at the school/district, the greater percentage of meals are reimbursed at the free rate.

The remaining percentage is reimbursed at the paid rate. This means that some school districts – particularly large districts that are all over the map on eligibility – cannot afford the aggregate difference on their already shoestring budgets and opt to implement CEP school by school. Healthy school meals for all streamlines this process so there isn't a patchwork approach in each district, as well as simplifying the reimbursement process for programs. Healthy school meals for all also provides the greatest amount of reimbursement based on total student population rather than the identified low-income student population, making it financially viable for all schools.

**Q: How do healthy school meals for all improve equity?**

A: Healthy school meals for all makes sure that no children – particularly our most vulnerable children and children who are on the line of eligibility – fall through the cracks. Given the current unstable economy, more children will likely be eligible for free meals this upcoming school year and their eligibility status may fluctuate. Healthy school meals for all also decreases lunch shaming and stigma in the cafeteria. In the Pandemic Child Hunger Prevention Act, there is a provision that while all schools get reimbursed for free school meals for all students, low-income schools receive a higher reimbursement rate.

**Q: With everything else that is of urgent need with the COVID-19 response, why is this the right time for healthy school meals for all?**

A: In some areas of the country, school will be starting again in just a few short weeks. Healthy school meals for all gives flexibility to programs so that they can keep feeding kids no matter what the new school day structure looks like. And combined with a non-congregate waiver, healthy school meals for all will ensure that children continue to eat while not at school, which is especially important since we know food insecurity has risen for households with children during the pandemic. Additionally, healthy school meals for all will help ensure that schools can continue to operate the federal child nutrition programs in a moment of unprecedented financial losses.

**Q: Since food insecurity is rising, how can healthy school meals for all complement an increase in the SNAP benefit and expanding Pandemic EBT (P-EBT)?**

A: All of these programs are vitally important to keep families fed. This isn't an either-or proposition, nor should we be pitting these programs against each other. While SNAP helps the whole family, and P-EBT helps close gaps for children who may not be able to receive their free school meals, school meals serve a unique, but important role since they have nutrition standards. School meals not only focus on keeping children fed but also are vitally important to ensure that they are receiving healthy foods that meet dietary recommendations for children. In fact, studies show that school meals are often healthier than meals brought from home. Given both the pandemic and the chronic disease crisis, it is more important than ever that we try to reach as many children as we can through all means necessary to give them the nutrition they need to live long, healthy lives.

**Q: How is healthy school meals for all a response to the COVID-19 pandemic?**

A: Given the COVID-19 pandemic and economic volatility, there is going to be a massive influx of children who will be eligible this school year (2020-2021). There will also be children who will likely weave in and out of eligibility, and families who have never navigated the social safety net system before and may not know their children are now eligible for free or reduced-price school meals or may be too ashamed to apply.

The pandemic has shined a bright light on all the fissures in our food and nutrition security systems. With growing unemployment, growing uncertainty surrounding the school year, and rising food insecurity – one in four children are expected to be food insecure due to the pandemic and Black and Hispanic households are twice as likely to be food insecure compared to white families – healthy school meals for all gives us a strong tool to keep kids from going hungry during these unprecedented times. Before the pandemic, school meals were often the only guaranteed meal for millions of children, and healthy school meals for all helps keep these services going so a child's access to food isn't dependent on income during a public health and economic crisis.