

# Healthy School Meals for All

## *Background*

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 30 million children participated in the school meals program,<sup>1</sup> and most of the participants (nearly 80 percent) are from low-income households.<sup>2</sup> When the pandemic shuttered schools and businesses across the country, schools found themselves feeding not just students, but entire communities. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued a series of waivers to allow schools to operate in this new normal; one of the waivers allowed schools to provide a free breakfast and lunch to every student through June 2022, effectively providing healthy school meals for all. We must ensure that healthy school meals for all are made permanent.

## *What are Healthy School Meals for All?*

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 negate the need for families to apply or for schools to verify eligibility for the programs and give flexibility to school nutrition programs to keep feeding kids no matter what the new school day structure looks like.

## *The Benefits of Providing Healthy School Meals for All*

### **Healthy School Meals for All Promote Nutrition**

- A systematic review examining free meals for all policies found that free meals for all are positively associated with school meal participation, and in most cases, are positively associated with diet quality, food security, and academic performance.<sup>3</sup> It is reasonable to assume that healthy school meals for all could have the same positive impact.
- By negating the need to stand in line to pay for meals, healthy school meals for all allow children more time to eat their meals.

### **Healthy School Meals for All Advance Equity**

- Healthy school meals for all remove stigma from children participating in the program, provide equitable access to healthy meals, and remove draconian measures schools may take to feed children who cannot pay. A recent report found that when all students have access to free meals, perceptions of bullying and fighting decrease, and kids that previously were income-eligible for free- or reduced-priced meals felt safer.<sup>4</sup>
- Healthy school meals for all provides assurance that children will receive free meals at school, even if their family income fluctuates in and out of typical eligibility requirements for free meals. Healthy school meals for all ensure 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. Families are still in crisis as a result of the pandemic's economic fallout—a recent poll found that 7 to 13 percent of adults with

children reported that their children sometimes or often didn't eat enough in the last seven days because they couldn't afford it.<sup>5</sup>

### **Healthy School Meals for All Support School Nutrition Programs**

- Healthy school meals for all help ensure that schools can continue to operate the federal child nutrition programs in a moment of unprecedented financial losses. In school year 2017-2018, 75 percent of school districts had unpaid meal debt.<sup>6</sup> By November 2020, programs reported a collective loss of \$2.1 billion.<sup>7</sup>
- Healthy school meals for all reduce administrative burden on school food service staff, provide a steady budget for school food service programs so they may remain fiscally solvent, eliminate unpaid meal balances, and take pressure off school food service programs to increase revenue by serving foods that may be lower in nutritional quality. This allows programs to focus on their primary function: feeding children healthy meals.

### *Policy Recommendations*

The expansion of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows higher-poverty schools to provide free meals to all children, as proposed by the Biden administration and in the Build Back Better Act is a significant step in the right direction. We also strongly support the [Universal School Meals Program Act](#), which would allow all school children, regardless of income, to receive free breakfast, lunch, and a snack. Pre-pandemic, high poverty schools were able to provide free meals to students through CEP, and all schools were able to provide free meals for all through other mechanisms. In many cases, these options were not financially feasible for schools.

In the absence of federally funded healthy school meals for all, states should pass policies to provide funding for healthy meals for all students. Policies should also require that all meals offered meet strong nutrition standards, to ensure that students receive healthy meals.

### *Resources*

- [Healthy School Meals for All](#) (CSPI)
- [Universal School Meals are Essential for Advancing Racial Equity](#) (Children's Defense Fund)
- [Messaging Guidance for an Effective School Food Campaign](#)
- [Model State School Foods Bill](#)
- [Universal Free School Meals: Comparing Funding Options to Create Hunger-Free Schools](#) (No Kid Hungry)

*For more information, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at [policy@cspinet.org](mailto:policy@cspinet.org).*

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Child Nutrition Tables: National Level Annual Summary Tables: FY 1969-2020*. 2022. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>. Accessed February 15, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, J, et al. Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review. *Nutrients* 2021; 13(3):911.

<sup>4</sup> Gutierrez, E. The Effect of Universal Free Meals on Student Perceptions of School Climate: Evidence from New York City. June 2021. EdWorkingPaper: 21-430. Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

<sup>5</sup> Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. *Tracking the COVID-19 Economy's Effects on Food, Housing and Employment Hardships*. September, 2021. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-economys-effects-on-food-housing-and>. Accessed September 13, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> School Nutrition Association. *2019 School Nutrition Trends*. 2019.

[https://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/About\\_SNA/SNA-Trends-Report-Infographic.pdf](https://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/About_SNA/SNA-Trends-Report-Infographic.pdf). Accessed August 17, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> School Nutrition Association. *School Nutrition Meals Served And Reimbursements During The COVID-19 Pandemic*. 2021. [https://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/News\\_and\\_Publications/Press\\_Releases/Press\\_Releases/School-Nutrition-Meals-Served-and-Reimbursements-During-the-COVID-19-Pandemic.pdf](https://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/News_and_Publications/Press_Releases/Press_Releases/School-Nutrition-Meals-Served-and-Reimbursements-During-the-COVID-19-Pandemic.pdf). Accessed August 30, 2021.