



December 13th, 2023

Phil Mendelson
Chairperson
Committee of the Whole
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Suite 504
Washington, D.C. 20004

Subject: Center for Science in the Public Interest Written Testimony in Support of B25-0035 – Universal Free School Meals Amendment Act of 2023

Chairman Mendelson and the Honorable Members of the Committee of the Whole:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on the Universal Free School Meals Amendment Act of 2023 (B25-0035). On behalf of the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a science-based consumer advocacy organization based in the District of Columbia (D.C.), I would like to take this opportunity to express our strong support for this Act. CSPI is a fierce defendant of science-based nutrition standards and has worked on school food for decades. Prior to our involvement in the passage of the federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which led to sweeping improvements in school meal nutrition, CSPI worked with state and local advocates to pass school nutrition policies across the country. Following the Trump Administration’s 2018 rule that weakened school nutrition standards, CSPI sued the Administration and won, ultimately getting their rule thrown out. CSPI also advocates for access to healthy meals for all students at the federal, state, and local level, including involvement in approximately a dozen healthy school meals for all state campaigns.

With this testimony, CSPI urges the Council to pass the Universal Free School Meals Amendment Act of 2023 which would provide free school meals and after school snacks to public school, public charter school, and participating private school students in D.C.

Healthy School Meals for All Provide Needed Economic Support for Families

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, federal funds allowed students nationwide to receive free breakfast and lunch, regardless of household income.ⁱ Despite an overwhelmingly positive response from school districts, families, and public health and education advocates, Congress allowed this to expire in summer 2022.ⁱⁱ In response to this change, several states, including California, Maine, Colorado, Vermont, New Mexico, Minnesota, Michigan, and Massachusetts have moved to ensure free access to school meals for students statewide.ⁱⁱⁱ

Current eligibility criteria for free school meals leave far too many behind, including lower middle-class families struggling to make ends meet. This school year, for a student to receive free meals, their household income cannot exceed \$39,000 annually for a family of four.^{iv}

Inflation is hurting families' budgets, and many cannot shoulder the costs of school meals. For those that do qualify for free meals, stigma and shame associated with qualifying prevent some students from participating.^v Nowhere else during the school day do we require proof of income like we do in the cafeteria. We willingly provide books and transportation regardless of family income.

School meals, which are an invaluable opportunity to instill healthy eating habits for life, should be treated no differently.^{vi}

Healthy School Meals for All Promote Nutrition, Food Security, and Academic Performance

A systematic review examining free meals for all policies found that they are positively associated with school meal participation, and in most cases, are positively associated with diet quality, food security, and academic performance.^{vii} Research shows that by 2017-2018, food consumed at school was the highest quality source of food for kids – followed by grocery stores, other sources, worksites, and restaurants.^{viii} Additionally, 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 for children participating in the program and provide equitable access to healthy meals. A recent report found that when all students have access to free meals, perceptions of bullying and fighting decrease outside of school and kids that previously were income-eligible for free- or reduced-priced meals felt safer inside the school, including the cafeteria.^{ix} 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.

Many families are struggling to put food on the table – a recent report found that 13.6% of households with children in D.C. reported food insufficiency in April 2021, compared with 6.7% of households without.^x

No child deserves to be hungry at school. Please ensure that children in D.C. have the nourishment and dignity they need to learn and thrive by passing the Universal Free School Meals Amendment Act of 2023.

Catherine Cochran

Catherine Cochran
Policy Associate
Center for Science in the Public Interest

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- ⁱ Families First Coronavirus Response Act. P.L. 116-127 § 2202, 134 Stat. 185.
- ⁱⁱ Keep Kids Fed Act of 2022. P.L. 117-158.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Food Research and Action Center. *Raise Your Hand for Healthy School Meals for All*. November 2023. [Healthy School Meals for All \(frac.org\)](https://www.frac.org/). Accessed December 13, 2023.
- ^{iv} 88 Fed Reg. 8397. Child Nutrition Programs: Income Eligibility Guidelines.
- ^v Cohen J et al. *Impact of Massachusetts' Healthy School Meals for All Policy on Families*. Nourish Lab at the Center for Health Inclusion, Research and Practice. June 2023. https://www.childnourishlab.org/files/ugd/383bcd_45ee5fed8e224ffd8639f0f498086e31.pdf. Accessed December 13, 2023.
- ^{vi} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Eating Healthier at School*. September 19, 2022. https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/features/eating_healthier.htm#:~:text=Schools%20play%20an%20important%20role,nutrients%20like%20calcium%20and%20fiber. Accessed December 13, 2023.
- ^{vii} 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.
- ^{viii} Liu J, et al. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021;4(4):e215262.
- ^{ix} Gutierrez E. The Effect of Universal Free Meals on Student Perceptions of School Climate: Evidence from New York City. Pages 22, 24. June 2021. EdWorkingPaper: 21-430. Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University.
- ^x District of Columbia Office of Planning, DC Food Policy Council, Government of the District of Columbia. *The Road Ahead: 2021 Update on Food Access & Food Security in the District of Columbia*. 2021. <https://dcfoodpolicy.org/foodsecurity2020/>. Accessed December 13, 2023.