

Healthy School Meals for All

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was established in 1946 to improve children's health in the U.S. and support families by providing low and no-cost meals to qualifying students. The School Breakfast Program (SBP) followed as a pilot project in 1966 and was made permanent in 1975. Today, the NSLP is the nation's second-largest federal feeding program, behind the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and feeds about 30 million children annually.¹

The NSLP and SBP are administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) at the federal level and state agencies (i.e., departments of education or agriculture) at the state level. The USDA sets eligibility criteria (based on household income) for students to receive free or reduced-priced meals. School food authorities (governing bodies that run school nutrition programs) receive federal funding based on the number of free, reduced-priced, and/or paid meals served to students.^{2,3} They may also receive additional state and/or local funding.

What are Healthy School Meals for All?

Healthy school meals for all (HSMFA), also known as universal free school meals, allow all children enrolled in a school participating in the NSLP or SBP to receive free breakfast and free lunch, regardless of their family's income. HSMFA provide equitable access to healthy school meals and negate the need for families to apply or for schools to verify students' eligibility for the programs.

Community Eligibility Provision

- Schools may offer HSMFA via the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows individual schools, groups of schools, and local educational agencies to provide HSMFA if at least 25 percent of their students are income-eligible for free meals.^{4,5} Through CEP, schools serve free healthy meals to 23.6 million children in more than 47,000 of the nation's highest-poverty schools across all 50 states.⁶ CEP was piloted in selected states starting in the 2011-2012 school year and became available nationwide in the 2014-2015 school year.⁷
- The eligibility threshold, known as the Identified Student Percentage (ISP), was 40 percent until 2023, when it was lowered to 25 percent.⁸ Lowering the threshold gives states and schools greater flexibility to offer free meals to all students, but only schools and districts with an ISP of 62.5 or higher receive federal reimbursement for all meals served at the highest (free) rate. This means that additional funding (e.g., state funds) is needed to make CEP financially viable for many schools and districts.

History of Healthy School Meals for All

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, spanning school years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022, USDA-issued waivers allowed all schools, regardless of eligible student population, to provide HSMFA nationwide.^{9,10,11} Despite an overwhelmingly positive response from school districts,¹² families, and public health and education advocates,¹³ Congress allowed these waivers to expire

in summer 2022. In response, several states, including California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont, have passed policies to ensure free access to school meals for students statewide.¹⁴

What are the Benefits of Providing Healthy School Meals for All?

Economic Support for Families

- Inflation is hurting families' budgets, and many families who currently do not qualify for free school meals may struggle to shoulder the costs of school meals. To qualify to receive free school meals, a student's family income must be at or below 130% of the Federal poverty level (or \$41,800 for a family of four in school year 2025-2026).¹⁵
- HSMFA can save families money by providing children with two nutritious, no-cost meals a day at school. For example, experts in New York state estimated that implementing HSMFA statewide could save New York families \$165 per month per child in food costs.¹⁶

Improved Nutrition, Food Security, and Academic Performance

- A 2021 systematic review examining free meals for all policies found that they are positively associated with school meal participation, and in many cases, are positively associated with diet quality, food security, and academic performance.¹⁷ With that, research shows that in 2017-2018, food consumed at school was the highest quality source of food for kids compared to food consumed from any other source, including grocery stores and restaurants.¹⁸
- In a 2024 report by the Food, Research & Action Center (FRAC), state child nutrition agencies in California, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont, five states that had HSMFA policies in place during the 2022-2023 school year, reported that HSMFA reduce childhood hunger and support academic achievement. Additionally, three states reported that HSMFA increase the number of fruits, vegetables, and milk students consume.¹⁹

More Equitable

- HSMFA provide assurance that all children will receive free meals at school, even if their family income fluctuates in and out of typical eligibility requirements for free meals. HSMFA also ensure that 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.
- HSMFA can reduce or even eliminate school meal stigma.^{20,21,22} A survey of Massachusetts families in 2023 found that 42% of families with children eligible for free or reduced-priced meals reported their child would be less likely to eat a school meal if it was not free for all children.²³
- A recent report found that when all students have access to free meals, student perceptions of bullying and fighting outside of school improve, and kids that previously were income-eligible for free or reduced-priced meals felt safer inside the school, including the cafeteria.²⁴

Financial and Administrative Support for School Nutrition Programs

- HSMFA can increase revenue for school nutrition programs by increasing school meal participation. According to FRAC’s 2024 report, school lunch participation increased in the five states that implemented HSMFA during the 2022-2023 school year compared to pre-pandemic levels, and school breakfast participation increased in four of the five states.²⁵ School nutrition directors consistently cite insufficient funding as a barrier to operating school meal programs.²⁶ With additional revenue from HSMFA, programs can focus on their primary function: feeding children healthy meals.
- HSMFA reduce the administrative burden on school food service staff. In a 2024 survey of food service directors, nearly 90% of respondents who do not offer free meals to all students reported paperwork/administrative burden as a challenge.²⁷
- HSMFA provide a steady budget for school food service programs so they may remain fiscally solvent and prevent unpaid meal debt from accruing. The same 2024 survey found that, among respondents who do not offer free meals to all students, 97% reported challenges with unpaid school meal charges/debt. With that, the median reported unpaid meal debt increased 25.6 percent from \$5,495 (n = 808) in fall of 2023 to \$6,900 (n = 627) in fall of 2024.²⁸

Policy Recommendations

Federal

Congress must pass and fund permanent, nationwide healthy school meals for all students. The 2023 expansion of CEP was a significant step in the right direction but faces threats in Congress. Below are recommendations for federal policymakers to protect CEP and expand access to free school meals:

Policymakers:

- Maintain an ISP threshold of 25 percent
- Support the Universal School Meals Program Act of 2023 (S. 1568/H.R. 3204), which would establish a nationwide HSMFA program
- Support policies that increase access to school meals, including:
 - School Meals Expansion Act of 2023 (H.R. 2567), which would increase federal funding for community eligibility schools
 - No Hungry Kids in School Act of 2023 (H.R. 3112), which would create a statewide community eligibility option
 - Expanding Access to School Meals Act of 2023 (H.R. 3113), which would increase eligibility for free meals to 200 percent of the poverty level, expand direct certification, make eligibility retroactive to the beginning of the school year, and increase funding for community eligibility schools

State and Local

In the absence of federally funded HSMFA, states should pass policies to fund access to free meals for all students. Policies should also require that all meals served meet strong nutrition standards to ensure students receive healthy meals. As of April 2025, eight states have implemented HSMFA policies, and many more have coalitions advocating for statewide policies. FRAC maintains a map of active campaigns and policy passage at: <https://frac.org/healthy-school-meals-for-all>. For states facing obstacles to passing statewide HSMFA, such as state budget restrictions, there are incremental steps that can be taken, such as:

Policymakers:

- Subsidize CEP with state funds – Example: The 2023-2024 New York state budget established a CEP State Subsidy, which ensures that all CEP meals are reimbursed at the free rate.^{29,30}
- Eliminate the reduced-price category – Example: Arkansas Act 656 of 2023 directs the Arkansas Department of Education to use state funds to cover the cost of eliminating reduced-price copayments not covered by federal reimbursements.³¹
- Implement free breakfast for all – Example: The 2023-2024 Pennsylvania state budget established permanent free breakfast for all public school students.³²

State departments of education and school districts:

- Provide guidance on how schools can maximize their ISP, such as by applying extended categorical eligibility and conducting direct certification as often as possible.³³
- Make free and reduced-price school meal applications available online and provide them in multiple languages.

Resources

- [Model State School Foods Bill](#)
- [Messaging Guidance for an Effective School Food Campaign](#)
- [The Case for Healthy School Meals for All](#) (FRAC)
- [The Community Eligibility Provision \(CEP\)](#) (FRAC)
- [The Many Benefits of School Meals for All](#) (Nutrition Policy Institute)
- [School Nutrition & Racial Equity: The Need for Universal, Healthy School Meals](#) (NAACP Legal Defense Fund)
- [Universal Meals Are Essential for Advancing Racial Equity](#) (Children’s Defense Fund)
- [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.

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- ³ USDA Food and Nutrition Service. *School Breakfast Program FAQs*. June 11, 2024. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/sbp/faqs>. Accessed April 23, 2025.
- ⁴ USDA Food and Nutrition Service. *Community Eligibility Provision*. June 13, 2024. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/cep>. Accessed April 23, 2025.
- ⁵ 88 Fed Reg. 65778. Child Nutrition Programs: Community Eligibility Provision-Increasing Options for Schools.
- ⁶ Hysom EK, FitzSimons, C. *Community Eligibility: The Key to Hunger-Free Schools — School Year 2023–2024*. Food Research & Action Center. 2024. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/CEP-Report-2024.pdf>. Accessed April 23, 2025.
- ⁷ 88 Fed Reg. 65778.
- ⁸ 88 Fed Reg. 65778.
- ⁹ Families First Coronavirus Response Act. P.L. 116-127.
- ¹⁰ Continuing Appropriations Act, 2021 and Other Extensions Act. P.L. 116-159.
- ¹¹ Extending Government Funding and Delivering Emergency Assistance Act. P.L. 117-43.
- ¹² School Nutrition Association. *Back to School 2021 Report: A Summary of Survey Results*. 2021. <https://schoolnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Back-to-School-Report-2021.pdf>. Accessed April 23, 2025.
- ¹³ Food Research & Action Center. *Organizational sign-on letter to Congress regarding extending pandemic school meal waivers*. 2022. https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/CN_Waiver_SignOnFeb2022.pdf. Accessed April 23, 2025.
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- ¹⁵ 90 Fed Reg. 11938. Child Nutrition Programs: Income Eligibility Guidelines.
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- ¹⁹ Bylander A, et al. *The State of Healthy School Meals for All: California, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont Lead the Way*. Food Research & Action Center. 2024. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/HSMFA-Report-2024.pdf>. Accessed April 23, 2025.
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