

Healthy School Meals for All

THE ISSUE

School meals are essential to tens of millions of children and their families, especially those living furthest from economic opportunity. These programs help children [grow up healthy](#) and ensure that all families [have enough to eat](#).

When the Covid-19 pandemic forced nationwide school closures—and hunger and food insecurity spiked—Congress passed the [Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#) and [CARES Act](#) in 2020. Provisions in those laws provide the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) with authority and funding to implement waivers that helped make it easier for schools to continue to serve meals to all students and their families.

Under these waivers, schools have been permitted to serve meals to all students at no charge (also known as universal school meals), to distribute meals to families outside of the school setting and to temporarily serve meals that meet the less-stringent nutrition standards of the [Summer Food Service Program](#). In 2021, USDA extended [universal school meals](#) and these additional flexibilities through the current school year. The waiver authority, including universal school meals, will expire on June 30, 2022.

Based on the overwhelming evidence of the benefits to children summarized in this brief, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation supports all federal and state efforts to extend universal school meals through at least the 2022-2023 school year, if not permanently, with commensurate federal funding to ensure schools are able to serve meals that align with the latest Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The Foundation also encourages federal and state efforts to strengthen school meal nutrition standards, and provide schools with the resources needed to meet those standards, to ensure children receive healthy food each day.



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WHY IT MATTERS

Ensuring every child has access to free *and healthy* school meals—not only during public health emergencies, but every day—will help end child hunger and build a healthier nation for generations to come.

Prior to the pandemic, schools offered free, reduced-price, or full-price meals to children, depending on family income level. Students in need often [missed out](#) on free or reduced-price meals, however, due to the program’s income eligibility guidelines and challenges families face when applying, including language and literacy barriers. The [stigma](#) associated with free or reduced-priced meals kept millions of eligible children from participating. And schools struggled with the [costs](#) of processing and verifying income applications.

The emergency measures implemented in response to the pandemic, which allow schools to temporarily serve meals that meet less stringent nutrition standards, have helped alleviate food insecurity and resource challenges for families and schools. However, the vast majority of school meal program directors have reported significant [challenges](#) with planning and serving nutritious meals during this time, primarily due to insufficient quantities of menu items, higher food costs and staffing shortages.

Key findings from a systematic review of [47 studies](#) conducted before the pandemic, as well as other recently published literature, show that offering healthy, free school meals for all students is a sound and vital investment that benefits kids, families and schools by:

Reducing food insecurity

[Food security](#) for all families increases when school meals are provided at no cost. In addition to ensuring children are fed nutritious meals at school, families save money they would have otherwise spent to buy and package meals for their children to take to school, which increases their purchasing power for other foods.

Increasing participation in school meals programs

Providing the same meals to all students at no cost reduces stigma and bullying. Prior to the implementation of universal school meals, students in some schools receiving free meals were served [different meals](#) or were forced to stand in [different lines](#).

Guidelines for Child Nutrition Programs

Child nutrition waivers allow schools to serve meals that follow the Summer Food Service Program’s guidelines, which are less stringent than USDA’s current nutrition standards for school lunch. Standards for the Summer Food Service Program require fewer of fruits and vegetables and have no requirement for fat content or flavoring of milk, whole grains or sodium.

Food Group	National School Lunch Program	Summer Food Service Program
Bread & Grains	1oz equivalent Whole grain requirements	1 slice bread 1 roll 1/2 c rice 1/2 c pasta No minimum whole grain requirements
Milk	8 oz Restrictions of fat content and flavoring	8 oz no restrictions on fat content or flavoring
Vegetables & Fruit	3/4 cup 1/2 cup Subgroup requirements for vegetables	3/4 cup Vegetables and fruit are a single component; no subgroup requirements
Meat & Meat Alternatives	1 oz equivalent	2 oz meat 2 oz cheese 1 egg 8oz yogurt 1/2 c beans
Sodium	Sodium restrictions with phased targets	no sodium restrictions or requirements
Calorie Restrictions	Calorie ranges based on grade level	Sponsors can adjust calories based on age, as desired
Sugar	No sugar restrictions or requirements	No sugar restrictions or requirements



Improving diet quality

Universal school meals are especially effective at helping kids eat healthy when those meals meet specific nutrition standards. This is consistent with the most comprehensive study of federal school meal nutrition standards to date that evaluated the quality of meals and children's diets during 2013-14. USDA found that students who received school lunches [scored higher on the Healthy Eating Index](#), a measure of overall diet quality that assesses how well a set of foods aligns with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans: participants had a Healthy Eating Index score of 80, while non-participants had a score of 65.

Boosting academic achievement and school attendance

Universal school meals, especially universal lunches, are linked with improvements in students' academic performance, including test scores and readiness to learn. Moreover, some evidence links universal school meals to increased school attendance among students from households with low wages. Researchers suggest students may be motivated to attend school to access food and/or that improved nutrition from school meals may also decrease illness, which could [improve attendance](#).

Supporting lower-income school districts

Schools that serve a high percentage of students from low-income households may benefit financially when meals are offered to all students at no charge due to increased revenues from federal reimbursements for meals. The increased labor costs incurred by schools providing more meals are more than offset by those reimbursements and reduced staff time spent on distributing and processing eligibility forms.

Reducing financial and administrative burdens on school nutrition programs is especially important as school food service systems have incurred significant losses due to the pandemic. According to USDA, school food service departments reported more than [\\$2 billion in federal revenue losses](#) from March to November 2020. Further, a national [survey](#) from December 2021 reveals 95 percent of school meal program directors are struggling with staff shortages and 97 percent are challenged by rising costs due to supply chain issues.

Addressing national school lunch debt

Many children are from families who earn too much to be eligible for free or reduced-priced meals, but earn too little to afford regular price school meals. When these children do not have cash in hand or sufficient funds in their school meals account to pay for their food, they can accrue significant [debt](#). More than 1.5 million children pay full price for school meals they cannot afford, making the national public school meal debt [\\$262 million](#) per year.

School lunch debt has been linked to [shaming practices](#), such as withholding food from students in the cafeteria and banning them from school events and graduation ceremonies. Several states and districts have passed [legislation](#) to prevent such tactics. Universal school meals effectively eliminate students' debt for unpaid meals, prevent stigma, and reduce administrative burdens on school staff, including time spent attempting to collect debt.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Children need healthy food to grow, learn and thrive. But millions of kids in America suffer from hunger every day—and children of color and those whose families are facing economic hardship are at [greater risk](#).

The pandemic has shown how essential school meals are for preventing child hunger and ensuring millions of families have enough to eat. Recent [data](#) show increased federal economic support reduced hunger during much of 2021, although food insecurity [rates](#) rose in late 2021 due to supply shortages and higher food prices. These conditions underscore the critical importance of child nutrition programs.

Measures that have helped schools serve kids and families in need during the pandemic provide a long-term roadmap for modernizing and improving school meal programs. Offering nutritious meals to all students at no cost in every school is a key component for helping children grow up healthy, lifting families out of [poverty](#) and alleviating significant financial and administrative burdens faced by schools.



Black (13%) and Hispanic (12.2%) children are [2x more likely to live in food-insecure households as white \(4.6%\) children.](#)

30M

Each year, nearly [30 million](#) students participate in the National School Lunch Program and nearly [15 million](#) students participate in the School Breakfast Program.

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Prior to the pandemic—[three-quarters](#) of children who participated in school meals programs qualified for free or reduced-price meals based on their household income and family size.

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About the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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