

7 Key Findings on The Benefits of Healthy School Meals for All

Schools play a vital role in promoting children's health and well-being. In the United States, schools contribute significantly to children's overall diet quality and can provide up to half of their daily calories, especially among children from low-income families. Providing healthy school meals for all is a policy opportunity to help all children eat healthier. Healthy School Meals for all, also known as universal free school meals, provides all enrolled children in a school operating the National School Lunch or School Breakfast Programs a free breakfast or lunch, regardless of their family's income.

A new [systematic review](#) included in a [Special Issue](#) in the journal [Nutrients](#) highlights the international evidence regarding the impact of healthy school meals for all on students' school meal participation rates, nutrition and dietary intakes, food security, academic performance, attendance, body mass index (BMI), and school finances. A total of 47 studies were included in the review; 25 were conducted in the United States and 22 were conducted in other countries with developed economies.

The 7 key findings from the systematic review in the Special Issue reveal how healthy school meals for all benefit students and schools.

1 School Meal Participation

Nearly all studies found that providing healthy school meals for all is associated with increases in the number of students participating in the school meal program.



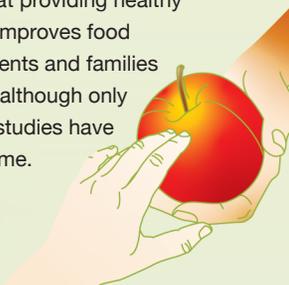
2 Diet Quality

The majority of studies found that providing healthy school lunches for all is positively associated with better student diet quality, particularly in the presence of strong school nutrition standards that include fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.



3 Food Security

There is evidence that providing healthy school meals for all improves food security among students and families with lower incomes, although only a limited number of studies have evaluated this outcome.



4 Academic Performance

Nearly half of the studies found that providing healthy school lunches for all is positively associated with students' academic performance (and no studies found an adverse impact on academic performance). More research is needed to understand the link between breakfast and academic achievement.

Academic performance may be influenced by healthy school meals for all directly through improvements in nutrition, as well as indirectly through increases in school attendance rates.



5 Attendance

Half of the studies found that providing healthy school meals for all significantly improves student attendance among students from lower-income and food-insecure households (and no studies found an adverse impact on attendance).



6 Body Mass Index

Healthy school meals for all with strong nutrition standards has been shown to not increase student Body Mass Index.



7 Finances

There is some evidence in the U.S. that school food service budgets benefit from use of the community eligibility provision (CEP), an option that allows schools in high poverty areas to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students; In particular, schools with a high percentage of students from low-income households may benefit financially from CEP due to increased revenues from federal reimbursements of school meals served.

