



2021 Position Paper

Permanently expand the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs to offer all students meals at no charge as an integral part of the educational experience.

Nutritious school meals for all students will:

Support academic achievement and foster healthy eating habits.

School meals are [proven](#) to support learning, boost test scores and improve attendance and classroom behavior. These meals contribute to students' overall health and wellness and combat childhood hunger. Research shows school lunches support obesity prevention; children receiving school lunches consume fewer empty calories and more milk, fruit, vegetables and fiber than their peers. Providing *all* students equal access to healthy school breakfast and lunch as part of their educational experience will ensure *every* child is nourished and ready to learn each school day.

Ensure access to healthy school meals at a critical time.

Since the pandemic, more than [4 in 10](#) children live in households that struggle to meet expenses, putting children at risk of going without the nutrition they need to focus on their studies. Food insecurity is linked to negative health, development and educational outcomes, such as slower progress in math and reading and a higher likelihood of repeating a grade.

Historically, only students from homes with incomes below 130 percent of the poverty line (\$34,060 for a family of four in 2020/21) are [eligible](#) for free school meals. Recognizing the extensive barriers to access school meals during the pandemic, including stigma and the complicated free meal application process, USDA issued [regulatory waivers](#) allowing schools to serve all students free meals in SY 2020/21.

As the nation recovers, continuing to provide school meals at no charge will ensure no child goes hungry during the school day, experiences shame or accrues [unpaid meal debt](#), a significant burden on families and school district budgets. Pre-pandemic, 75% of school districts [reported](#) having unpaid student meal debt, and the amount of debt reported was rising. When families are unable to pay for student meals, schools must cut into education funds to cover the debt. Providing meals at no charge will eliminate unpaid meal debt, anticipated to increase as a result of current economic challenges. No student will have to worry about going without a healthy meal at school.

Ease burdens on school nutrition staff, so they can focus on serving students.

Offering healthy school meals to all students at no charge will eliminate the costly, time-consuming meal application and verification process and streamline paperwork and reporting requirements. Parents won't have to worry about complicated meal applications, and school nutrition professionals can focus on nourishing students.