

## Increasing Access to Free School Meals to Address Food Insecurity and Improve Diet Quality

What children eat today affects their future cancer risks. Poor diet, including the consumption of high-calorie foods and beverages, is a major contributor to excess weight. And there is increasing evidence that excess body fat over the course of a lifetime, beginning in childhood, has adverse health consequences,<sup>i</sup> including cancer. In fact, approximately 4%–5% of all adult cancer cases are attributed to poor diet.<sup>ii</sup>

Children with access to nutritious food are more likely to develop healthy eating habits they can continue to use into adulthood. In addition, research suggests that dietary patterns during adolescence may influence cancer risk in adulthood.<sup>iii,iv</sup> A healthy eating pattern is associated with a reduced risk of cancer in adults.

Access to quality nutritious food is a social determinant of health (SDOH). Food insecurity is defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life, due to a lack of financial resources for food at home.<sup>v,vi</sup> Whereas, having consistent access to affordable quality nutritious food that promotes healthfulness and prevents diet related disease is known as nutrition security.

In 2021, 33.8 million people lived in food-insecure households and 5 million of them were children.<sup>vii</sup> National child nutrition programs can prevent the negative health effects of food insecurity, improve food security and provide children with a regular source of nutritious meals.<sup>viii</sup> Having to pay and qualify for free or reduced-price school meals can create barriers for many students to access these healthy meals. Offering nutritious free school meals and snacks, before, during, and after school to all students is an effective policy intervention to address food insecurity and improve diet quality.

### Federal Child Nutrition School Meal Programs and Eligibility

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act ([S.3307](#)) was passed in 2010 to reduce childhood hunger and obesity by improving the quality of foods offered in school meals. The legislation required stronger school and early childcare nutrition standards and established the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), a national school meal option to expand access to free school meals to students living in limited-income communities beginning in 2014.

School meal programs are funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) and are administered in states and territories by state agencies through agreements with local school food authorities. The school breakfast and school lunch programs are the two largest child nutrition programs. For students to participate in the program, families must meet the following income requirements:<sup>ix,x</sup>

- Students in households at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty line can receive a free breakfast and lunch.
- Students in households between 130 and 185 percent of the Federal poverty line can receive a reduced-price breakfast and lunch, which is price-capped by USDA.

- Students in households above 185 percent of the Federal poverty line can receive a low-cost, full-price breakfast and lunch, which is price-capped by local school districts.

These financial barriers and meal application requirements create obstacles for many students needing to access free and reduced-priced school meals. To eliminate some of those barriers, individual schools may elect to participate in one of two existing federal alternative options to provide free school meals to their students, either the CEP or Provision 2, but those options are still limited on who they serve and for how long.

The CEP option is only available to high-poverty schools or school districts with at least 40% or more of their students identified as participating in federal nutrition assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and/or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), are homeless, migrants, in foster care, or enrolled in Head Start (and Medicaid, in some states). The percentage of students participating in



federal nutrition assistance programs is known as the “identified student percentage” or ISP. Alternatively, any school can elect to participate in the Provision 2 option requiring the collection and certification of school meal applications the first year of participation. That data is then used to calculate the reimbursement to provide free school meals for all their students for a period of 4 years. While there are many benefits of offering free school meals to all students through both the CEP and Provision 2 options, the application processes – even for one year – can be burdensome to schools. In addition, the decision for schools to voluntarily choose to participate in either CEP or Provision 2 is decided by the local education authority (LEA) and can pose challenges for schools.

## The Benefits of Increasing Access to Free School Meals

School meals offer students a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and age-appropriate portion sizes and may be the only nutritious meals many children eat during the day. In fact, a 2021 study evaluating the quality of meals consumed by both children and adults over a 16-year period found that school meals provided the highest quality food source for Americans, without population disparities – more so than grocery stores, restaurants, worksites, and food trucks.<sup>xi</sup> A policy of offering all students free school meals, otherwise referred to as “universal free school meals” or “healthy school meals for all” is a way to increase access and eliminate barriers to students’ participation in school meals programs.

Research and evaluation have proven that participation in school meal programs reduces food insecurity and improves the diet quality and academic performance of children.<sup>xii,xiii,xiv</sup> In adopting this policy, schools would be reimbursed for the nutritious school meals and snacks they provide to all their students at no charge instead of being reimbursed to provide free or reduced-price meals to only qualifying students.<sup>xv</sup> The benefits to students and their families as well as to schools when universal free school meals are offered include:<sup>xvi,xvii,xviii</sup>

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**Students and Families:**

- Addressing food insecurity and improving diet quality, which may reduce the risk of diet-related cancer in adulthood;
- Reducing the number of food-insecure households with children;<sup>xix</sup>
- Improving student diet quality, academic performance, and overall well-being;
- Eliminating the barrier of limited-income households having to annually complete school meal applications;
- Eliminating the stigma and shame experienced by kids from households with limited incomes who receive or are reluctant to receive free or reduced priced meals; and
- Eliminating unpaid school meal debt from families with students receiving reduced-price or paid meals.

**Universal Free School Meals Policy in Action**

Various studies have evaluated the effectiveness of universal free school meals being offered through the CEP at high-poverty schools and found notable improvements in student nutrition intake, attendance, academic performance — including higher reading and science test scores, and schools benefit from increased school meal participation, elimination of school meal debt, and reduced administrative burdens.<sup>xviii, xix, xx</sup>

At the beginning of the COVID-19 public health emergency, there were serious concerns that children would lose access to nutritious school meals and lead to more children becoming food insecure. To prevent that from occurring, the USDA issued a temporary waiver in March 2020 that allowed all schools to implement a universal free school meals policy providing free healthy school meals to all students regardless of their household size or income.<sup>xxi</sup> During the 2020–2021 school year 99.2% of breakfasts<sup>xxii</sup> and 99.3% of lunches<sup>xxiii</sup> were provided to students for free. The temporary waivers expired June 30, 2022. As a result, the standard federal school meal program requirements to provide free or reduced-price school breakfast and lunch programs only to qualifying students from households that meet the income eligibility requirements resumed.

Several states have implemented universal free school meals for all students through a variety of different policy options. California, Colorado, Maine, Minnesota, New Mexico and Vermont have enacted state legislation and secured funding to permanently pay for universal free school meals to their students. Whereas Connecticut and Massachusetts enacted state legislation to fund universal free school meals for *only* the 2022–2023 school year and are working to pass universal free school meals for additional school years.

In addition, some states have chosen to enact laws to increase participation in the CEP option. The states of Maryland, Oregon, Virginia, and Washington have enacted laws to require their schools to participate in the CEP, lowering the identified student percentage threshold to expand existing CEP participation within their state, and increasing access to free school meals to students from household incomes above 199% or 300% of the Federal poverty line.

**Schools:**

- Increasing participation in school meal programs can reduce administrative costs by streamlining operations;
- Eliminating the requirement to annually collect, process, and verify the school meal applications;
- Eliminating the administrative process of tracking the types of meals served by fee category (i.e., free, reduced-price, and paid);
- Streamlining the school meal delivery process by providing the school meals to all students instead of only qualifying students; and
- Eliminating the need for school staff to reconcile school meal payments and collect unpaid school meal debt.

**ACS CAN's Position**

The school breakfast and school lunch programs may be the only nutritious meals many children, especially those from families with limited incomes, eat during the day. ACS CAN advocates for policies that support increasing access to free school meals at both the federal and state level aimed to reduce food insecurity and improve diet quality. Again, children with access to quality nutritious food are more likely to develop healthy eating habits, which may influence their cancer risk in adulthood. A healthy eating pattern is associated with a reduced risk of cancer in adults. ACS CAN advocates for both universal free school meal policies and expanding access to the Community Eligibility Provision that also allows high-poverty schools to offer all students free school meals at no charge to all students. In addition, ACS CAN will continue to support efforts to improve the quality of school meals and snacks through the implementation of evidence-based national school nutrition standards.

<sup>i</sup> American Cancer Society. Cancer Facts & Figures 2022. Atlanta: American Cancer Society; 2022.

<sup>ii</sup> Islami F, Goding Sauer A, Miller KD, et al. Proportion and number of cancer cases and deaths attributable to potentially modifiable risk factors in the United States. *CA Cancer J Clin*. 2018;68(1): 31-54.

<sup>iii</sup> Ruder EH, Thiebaut AC, Thompson FE, et al. Adolescent and mid-life diet: risk of colorectal cancer in the NIH-AARP Diet and Health Study. *Am J Clin Nutr* 2011;94:1607-19.

<sup>iv</sup> Harris HR, Willett WC, Vaidya RL, Michels KB. Adolescent dietary patterns and premenopausal breast cancer incidence. *Carcinogenesis* 2016;37:376-84.

<sup>v</sup> American Cancer Society. What's the Connection? Food Insecurity, Obesity, and Cancer: Food Insecurity – The Basics (2022), retrieved from [https://www.acs4ccc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/FI\\_WhatsTheConnection\\_updated2021.pdf](https://www.acs4ccc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/FI_WhatsTheConnection_updated2021.pdf).

<sup>vi</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Security, accessed July 7, 2023, retrieved from <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-security>.

<sup>vii</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Food and Nutrition Assistance, Food Security in the U.S., Key Statistics & Graphics, accessed on May 25, 2023, retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/key-statistics-graphics>.

<sup>viii</sup> Katherine, Ralston, Katie Treen, Alisha Coleman-Jensen, and Joanne Guthrie. 2017. *Children's Food Security and USDA Child Nutrition Programs*, EIB-174, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

<sup>ix</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Child Nutrition Program: National School Lunch Program. Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/child-nutrition-programs/school-breakfast-program/>

<sup>x</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Child Nutrition Program: National School Lunch Program. Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/child-nutrition-programs/national-school-lunch-program/>

<sup>xi</sup> Liu J, Micha R, Li Y, Mozaffarian D. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021;4(4):e215262. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.5262.

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- <sup>xiii</sup> Food Research & Action Center. (2019). School Meals are Essential for Student Health and Learning. Retrieved from <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning.pdf>.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Gunderson, C., Kreider, B., & Pepper, J. (2012). The impact of the National School Lunch Program on child health: a nonparametric bounds analysis. *Journal of Econometrics*, 166, 79–91.
- <sup>xv</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, National School Lunch Program: Rates of Reimbursement. Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/rates-reimbursement>.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Food Research and Action Center. Large School District Report Operating School Nutrition Programs During the Pandemic. 2022. Available online: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/large-school-district-report-2022.pdf> (accessed on February 7, 2023).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Food Research and Action Center. Large School District Report Operating School Nutrition Programs as the Nation Recovers From the Pandemic. 2023. Available online: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/large-school-district-report-2023.pdf> (accessed on July 7, 2023).
- <sup>xviii</sup> The Community Preventative Services Taskforce (CPSTF) Finding and Rationale Statement: Social Determinants of Health: Healthy School Meals for All, Ratified July 2022. Available online: <https://www.thecommunityguide.org/pages/tffrs-social-determinants-health-healthy-school-meals-all.html> (accessed on July 7, 2023).
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- <sup>xx</sup> Tatiana Andreyeva and Xioahun Sun, “Universal School Meals in the US: What Can We Learn from the Community Eligibility Provision?”, *Nutrients* 13 (8) (2021): 2634, available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8398513/>.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Judith S. Barfield, Lawrence Berger, and Fei Men, “Universal Access to Free School Meals through the Community Eligibility Provision Is Associated with Better Attendance for Low-Income Elementary School Students in Wisconsin,” *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* 120 (2) (2020): 210–218, available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2212267219310287>.
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- <sup>xxiv</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Nutrition Service, Data & Research: Child Nutrition Tables: National Level Annual Summary Tables: FY 1969-2021, School Breakfast - Participation and Meals Served, retrieved from <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/sbsummar-11.pdf>.
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