



# The Many Benefits of School Meals for All

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## BACKGROUND

Building on federal child nutrition supports during the COVID-19 pandemic, California and Maine, followed by six other states, have instituted permanent School Meals for All programs; many more are working to pass such legislation.<sup>1</sup> Further, the proposed federal Universal School Meals Program Act of 2023 (S 1568/HR 3204) would provide breakfast, lunch, dinner and a snack to all U.S. public school children regardless of family income. This brief presents research findings on key benefits of a School Meals for All program.

## BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS

**Better nutrition.** Universal school meal (USM) programs expand participation, so more students benefit from the improved nutrition standards of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which have made schools the overall healthiest source of food in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> The school lunch is typically healthier than meals brought from home,<sup>3</sup> and studies show that participating in school meals improves children’s overall dietary quality.<sup>4</sup>

**Better health.** Poor diet quality is a risk factor for a multitude of chronic diseases. Improving children’s diets can help reduce their risk of developing diet-related chronic diseases including coronary vascular disease, type 2 diabetes and dental disease.<sup>5</sup> USM programs also can reduce overweight and obesity in students.<sup>6,7</sup>

**Improved academics and attendance.** Studies suggest that students do better academically and have better attendance rates when meals are provided without charge to all children.<sup>8</sup>

**Less stigma.** Feelings of shame or being stigmatized for eating school meals are reduced when school meals are no longer thought to be just for “poor kids.” Also, shaming associated with unpaid meal debt is eliminated.<sup>9,10</sup>

**Greater sociability.** Providing USM can encourage more students to eat together and socialize, which supports their social and emotional learning and refreshes them for afternoon classes.<sup>11,12</sup>

## BENEFITS FOR FAMILIES

**Family ease.** Families report school meals save them money and time and reduce family stress.<sup>13</sup> With a federal USM program, families’ burdensome application process could also be eliminated.

**Reduced food insecurity.**<sup>14</sup> Even families with incomes above the eligibility limit for free or reduced-price school meals can be food insecure.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, because a higher cost of living is significantly associated with poor nutrition,<sup>16</sup> if eligibility is based solely on a single national benchmark for household income it disadvantages families in high cost of living areas.

## BENEFITS FOR SCHOOLS

**Lower meal costs.** With USM programs, meal costs can be reduced through economies of scale and lower administrative burden, without sacrificing nutritional quality of meals.<sup>17</sup>

**Improved school climate.** USM can improve the learning environment at school for all.<sup>18</sup>

## References:

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