

The Impact of Healthy School Meals for All

What was it like having free school meals for all during the pandemic, and what has it been like without it?

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My youngest son does not eat breakfast ... because of the cost at school. We do not qualify for free or reduced meals. \$200 doesn't seem much to some, but when you live paycheck to paycheck, it can be an added expense.” — **Wisconsin parent**

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I believe [that] when students don't have to decide whether to eat because they [can] pay or not, they can focus on their education.” — **Florida food services director**

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Not only did families not need to worry about school lunch debt, school meals were normalized across the district. It became not only the 'poor kids' eating breakfast in the morning. Our schools embraced the increase in breakfasts served and introduced breakfast into the classrooms. At one of our pre-K–8th grade schools we saw a 200% increase in breakfast participation. Now, without the no cost breakfast, this school is back to its pre-pandemic numbers.”
— **Minnesota assistant nutrition director**

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A principal advised us, 'You cannot teach children who are hungry when they arrive at school.' ... School meals are wonderful for the children who come from a home engulfed by poverty, and must be made available as we are close to losing a generation of children due to hunger.”
— **Maryland nonprofit director**

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Healthy school meals for all is essential ... throughout the [U.S.] because it shows the citizens and individuals young and old that there is a sense of belonging, together with compassion, love, kindness, acceptance, and respect.”
— **Vermont advocate**





I have two kids in high school. They ate school lunch every day during the past school year. My daughter raved about the wide variety of fruits and vegetables offered. She and her group of friends had buttons made that read ‘Ms. Jenny’s Lunch Crew.’ Ms. Jenny made lunchtime a fun experience for that freshman group of kids. Having free meals at school was a wonderful experience for my kids They would get school lunch every day if it was in my budget.” — Michigan parent



Hunger has a huge impact on their education in every aspect. Social emotional skills, motor skills, language skills — all are greatly impacted when they are hungry. Disease and illness are more likely if the child is being neglected on the proper nutrients. ALL children are in need of the free school meals. Poverty is not the only reason for children to be hungry and lacking nutritious foods. Working parents are extremely busy and too stressed to plan, shop, and fix nutritious meals.” — Texas educator



Having universal free meals has allowed more students to participate in breakfast and lunch. Our participation has grown! The extra funds have also allowed us to serve more selections of fresh fruits and vegetables than ever before We are also excited about purchasing more local items than ever before. To see the quality products that we are able to serve to our children is so rewarding.”

— Virginia school food services director



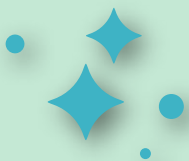
As a single mother with income too high to qualify for any type of public assistance, it is a struggle to make ends meet. The high cost of child care and health insurance at full cost are killing me! I have to commute for work, which leaves us little time in the evenings to have dinner, prepare for the next day, and spend quality time together. Knowing that my child would get healthy meals at school was a relief as I did not have to worry about the additional cost of buy[ing] and preparing his lunches every day.” — Florida parent



[Free school meals for all] has helped our family with two school-aged kids quite a bit. Inflation is making groceries quite expensive for a family of four, and free school lunch helps economically and saves us precious morning prep time. I think it should be a universal offering for public schools.” — Connecticut parent



I grew up in a conflicted household and having a free lunch program was the only promise of getting a solid meal. I don’t think anyone should be deprived of food ever, but especially not kids. Going hungry in childhood encourages a desperation mindset that can cause a lot of problems down the line. Expecting kids to learn while depriving them of essential food is completely unrealistic and cruel.” — Minnesota adult who struggled with hunger as a child





I am a single mom of school-age children, earning just under 200% of the poverty level. Free lunches (and breakfasts) removed the stress of having to budget for school lunch or home lunch (and having to remind kids to pack/bring their home lunch). In my state, “very low income” for a single person is \$68,000/yr; however, earning over \$49,000/yr with two kids means you don’t qualify for any aid at all including reduced-price lunch. This is a huge discrepancy that must be addressed, because far too many kids fall into similar gaps.

Additionally, I worked as a school baker during the 2021–2022 school year, and saw firsthand the benefits for kids and their families. A huge weight was lifted, and the kids were happier, healthier, and more focused. This is a relatively simple and low-cost way to ensure all our kids have the opportunity to be successful in school.” — Hawaii parent



Prior to the pandemic, I struggled with school lunch debt. Each pay period, I dumped a portion of my paycheck into my daughter’s school meal account. In doing so, I paid off her debt and added a few more dollars for future meals. Within a few days, the account balance was in the negative again. [My daughter] came home from school on those days and said, Mom, you need to give more money to the cafeteria. I felt like we were drowning. Despite being a single mother, my income was relatively decent. Therefore, [my daughter] didn’t qualify for free or reduced school meals. Yet, high housing and health care costs consumed the majority of my income. Even though we no longer live in a food insecure household, universal school meals will help me to continue to move towards a more stable and financially secure life for me and my daughter.” — Massachusetts parent



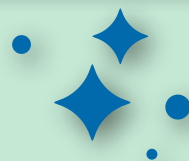
Retired teacher here. I’ve been retired for five years now, and I’ve taught grade school kids from all grades, as well as middle school reading and high school science. There is absolutely nothing that happens in school that makes me angrier than having a hungry child ... this is the wealthiest, most prosperous, most powerful country in the world. Or at least that’s what we’ve been telling each other. I don’t see how that can be the case if we have even one hungry kid.” — Wisconsin retired educator and community leader



Healthy school meals for all have allowed my family to not worry about one more bill that needs to be paid. It has freed up funds within my budget to help cover the rising increase of all the other household needs. You figure I was paying over \$30 a week for two children in school for lunches. That is a significant savings.” — New York parent



It’s been incredibly personally healing to see how universal meals has really equalized school meals and allowed all students to access them without stigma. I would watch a whole class come down for breakfast together or a whole class line up for lunch, and it literally brought me to tears to see how universal meals changed the culture of school meals. This was worlds apart from my own childhood being one of a handful of students getting school meals because we qualified for free meals. This made me feel isolated from my friends, and as I went on to middle and high school, I stopped eating breakfast/lunch most days so that I wouldn’t feel the stigma of getting the school meal.” — Colorado food services employee

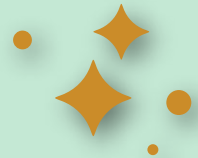




I have been a single mom for most of my life with three kids. I make a little too much money to qualify for food stamps, and when my kids were home from school during the pandemic, our food budget increased greatly (three teenage boys eat a lot). The take-home meals provided by the schools really saved me, it would have been hard for me to afford groceries otherwise. My hours at work were cut because of the pandemic, and when they went back to school full time, the free school breakfasts and lunches were a huge help with my food budget. School meals are expensive. Where I live it's over \$5/day per student for breakfast and lunch. My kids also appreciated [it] when all the school meals were free because they have felt embarrassed or judged in the past because we had free or reduced-price lunch; they said they didn't like other kids knowing about it, and it made them self-conscious. Having access to healthy, nutritious meals should be for EVERY student.” — Ohio parent



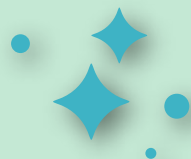
Saves so much money! We can have more money to buy better food for our dinners at home.” — Pennsylvania parent



The free school meals that were offered the past two years were a godsend. With five children in our household, it is difficult to juggle the rising costs of everything during this time. With the free meals it ensured that all of my children were receiving a healthy well-balanced meal for breakfast and lunch. I don't consider my family low-income, but we definitely are not rich. We struggle day to day with our normal household bills but always find a way to make it work. This year, when we were notified that there would no longer be free meals offered, we looked into applying for the reduced meals. We were just a few dollars over the qualifying limit. ... I am sad that I am not able to provide meals as healthy as the school, but for one school year alone, it would cost me \$5,313.00. Which means I would have to choose between meals at home, gas for work, groceries and utilities, or school meals.” — Nebraska parent



The free meals the past two years have been so beneficial for our family. I am a child care worker, which is a field notorious for low pay. I 'make too much' for help [from] the county, but let's be real, who really makes 'too much' for help with meals for their children Now you have children that are having their school lunches literally taken from them and thrown away due to lack of funds on the child's account. This is happening right in front of them and their schoolmates.” — Ohio parent





This last year, we heard time and time again from many parents that having to once again pay for school meals has been a huge burden on their family and finances — especially when food prices have increased so drastically, along with the housing crisis in our community, along with inflation and gas price increase, etc. Having school meals paid for throughout the pandemic was a huge relief for many families, and now having to figure out how to budget that into their lives is nearly impossible for many families. We have had the busiest eight months we have ever seen at the food bank, and we attribute much of that to families struggling to make ends meet.”

— Montana food pantry service provider



Healthy school meals for all across the country assures the families of low-wage earners that their children will have a decent meal in school now that most have to cut back due to inflation. This meal opportunity also relieves food pantries that are now struggling to meet the needs of their patrons.” — **New York educator and Catholic sister**



During June’s summer school, I had students begging for additional food. It didn’t matter if someone had eaten from the plate. They were hungry. Our students can’t help their home situations. My priority is feeding the children and providing them with two healthy meals a day. I think that lawmakers should support the free meal initiative for our children. Our children need to have the need for food met before they can learn.”

— Louisiana child nutrition program director



We have less students participating in the National School Breakfast and Lunch programs because it is not free for all anymore. We also have students who are participating, but their parents are not making payments for their meals. During the first three weeks school was opened August 2022, our small district of 3,000 students has a total negative student meal balance of \$20,000. We do not have a charge limit because our CEO said he wants all of our students to be able to function and have access to healthy meals. ALL STUDENTS should have this same opportunity without added stress to the student, their families, and especially the financial strain put on the school district. I challenge any politician to go to a local public school and witness crying children who cannot eat because their parents didn’t pay their balance or crying children because they had to receive an alternate meal because their parents didn’t pay their balance. It is completely heartbreaking to tell a student, a child, they cannot eat when food is all around them and they are hungry.” — **Texas educator**

