



# **The State of Healthy School Meals for All**

Eight States Show the Nation What Is Possible

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This report was prepared by Clarissa Hayes, Alexis Bylander, and Crystal FitzSimons of the Food Research & Action Center. The findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of FRAC alone.

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## About FRAC


The Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) improves the nutrition, health, and well-being of people struggling against poverty-related hunger in the United States through advocacy, partnerships, and advancing bold and equitable policy solutions. For more information about FRAC, or to [sign up](#) for FRAC's e-newsletters, go to [www.frac.org](http://www.frac.org).


For more information about Healthy School Meals for All policies and campaigns, go to [www.FreeSchoolMealsforAll.org](http://www.FreeSchoolMealsforAll.org).






## During the 2023–2024 School Year

 Three Healthy School Meals for All states — California, Maine, and Massachusetts — that first implemented during the 2022–2023 school year saw **INCREASES in both school breakfast and lunch participation in 2023–2024**, compared to the previous year. This shows that there was still room for participation to increase, even after the first year of implementation.<sup>1</sup>

 The four Healthy School Meals for All states — Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, and New Mexico — that implemented during the 2023–2024 school year all saw **INCREASES in both breakfast and lunch participation**, compared to the previous year when many schools went back to determining student eligibility for free, reduced-price, and paid meals.

 All eight states continued to have a gap between breakfast and lunch participation, showing there is still **ROOM FOR GROWTH in the School Breakfast Program**. Participation in lunch is growing faster than breakfast, so barriers preventing students from participating in school breakfast still exist.

## Executive Summary

School meals have always played an important role in reducing childhood hunger, supporting good nutrition, and ensuring that students can get the most out of their school day. For more than two school years during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were able to offer meals to all students at no charge through the pandemic-related child nutrition waivers offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). This served as a trial run for nationwide Healthy School Meals for All (HSMFA), and it was a resounding success.

Students, regardless of household income, had access to nutritious meals to help them thrive at school. Parents did not have to worry about packing lunches or paying for meals, and school nutrition professionals were able to give a meal to any child that needed one without worrying about account balances or collecting unpaid school meal debt. Several states decided they did not want to return to pre-pandemic school meal operations, which required determining children's eligibility for free, reduced-price, or paid meal categories, and introduced legislation to permanently provide free school meals for all students.



During the 2023–2024 school year, **60 PERCENT** of schools that participated in the National School Lunch Program offered free meals to all their students, either because the school utilized the Community Eligibility Provision or because the school was in a Healthy School Meals for All state<sup>2</sup>.

Currently, eight states — California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont — have passed policies to make school meals available to all students at no charge, regardless of household income. Similar legislation has been introduced in more than 20 other states.

It has become clear that means-testing access to school meals is not an efficient or effective way to run school meal operations. Collecting school meal applications from families is cumbersome, leads to schools charging students different prices for the same meal, and

creates administrative burdens for school food service departments.

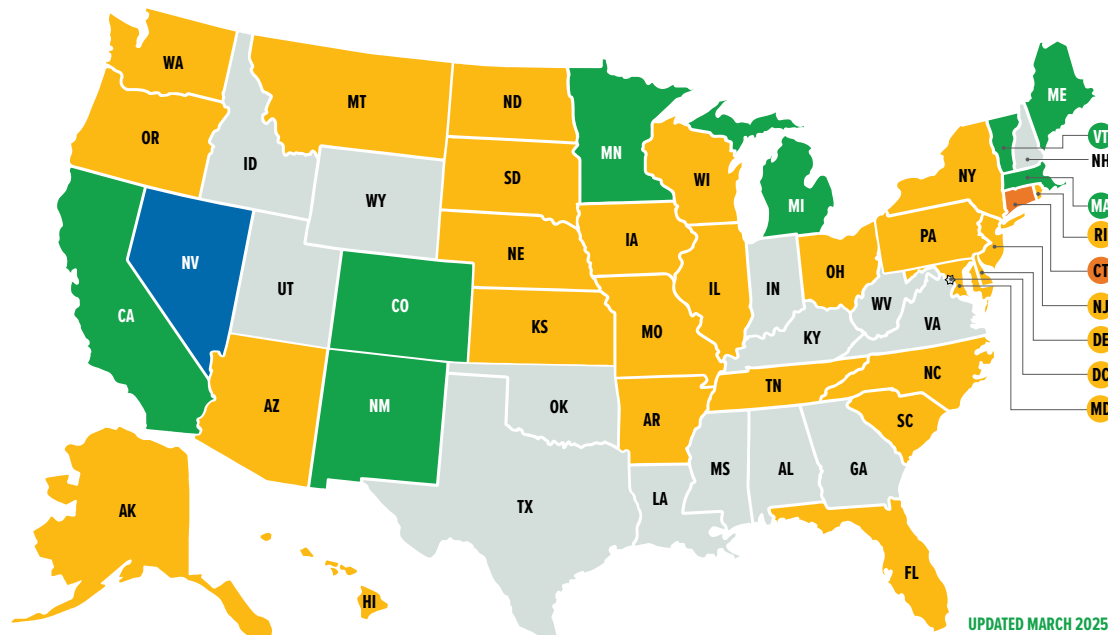
The increase in school meal participation in Healthy School Meals for All states shows the success and popularity of the approach and highlights the need for Congress to pass legislation so that all students, regardless of where they live, have access to the nutrition they need to learn and thrive. Until Congress acts, states should continue to pass Healthy School Meals for All policies that ensure the children in their state have access to nutritious food that helps them succeed at school.

## A Deeper Look at the Data

### Continued Growth Among HSMFA Early Adopters in the 2023–2024 School Year

California, Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont implemented Healthy School Meals for All policies beginning in the 2022–2023 school year. This first cohort of states provides important insight on the progression of HSMFA policies. Considering the fact that pandemic-era waivers from USDA allowed schools to offer free meals during the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 school years, the 2023–2024 school year represented the fourth consecutive year that California, Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont offered free meals to all of their students.

- ▶ School breakfast participation **INCREASED** in California, Maine, and Massachusetts during the 2023–2024 school year. These three states provided breakfast to just over 172,000 additional students when compared to the 2022–2023 school year.
- ▶ Overall breakfast participation **INCREASED** by 8.1 percent across these three states.
- ▶ School lunch participation **INCREASED** in all four states by just over 119,000 additional students, or 3 percent, when compared to the 2022–2023 school year.
- ▶ The gap between breakfast and lunch participation decreased in the 2023–2024 school year compared to the previous year, with 56 children receiving a school breakfast for every 100 children who received a school lunch, compared to 53.4 per 100 in the 2022–2023 school year.
- ▶ While Vermont experienced a drop in overall breakfast participation, participation by those students eligible for free and reduced-price meals [increased](#).



- Policies Passed
- Policy in Place for 2022–2023 School Year and Part of 2023–2024 School Year
- Policy in Place for 2022–2023 School Year
- HSMFA Bills Introduced

### Second Wave of States Join Healthy School Meals for All Momentum

Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, and New Mexico launched their Healthy School Meals for All policies during the 2023–2024 school year. Unlike the first cohort, these states had a year between when the nationwide waivers ended during the 2022–2023 school year and when schools were allowed to offer meals at no charge.

- ▶ School breakfast participation **INCREASED** in Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, and New Mexico during the 2023–2024 school year. These four states provided breakfast to 245,741 additional students, or 27.2 percent, when compared to the 2022–2023 school year.
- ▶ School lunch participation **INCREASED** in all four states by a total of 291,555 students, or 16 percent, compared to the 2022–2023 school year.

### About This Report

This report measures the reach of school breakfast and lunch in states that had Healthy School Meals for All policies in place for the 2023–2024 school year. It looks at participation data from September to May, primarily compared to the 2022–2023 school year and 2018–2019 school year (pre-pandemic operations). Information from the school years in between is included as reference points in Appendix 1. For more information on which programs are included and how data were calculated, see the Technical Notes.

**A DEEPER LOOK AT THE DATA** CONTINUED

- ▶ The gap between breakfast and lunch participation decreased in the 2023–2024 school year compared to the previous year, with 53 children receiving a school breakfast for every 100 children who received a school lunch, compared to 48.1 per 100 in the 2022–2023 school year.
- ▶ The larger increase seen by the second cohort is likely due to the fact there was no continuation between schools being able to offer meals at no charge through the pandemic waivers and the start of their statewide policies; students who stopped participating when meals were no longer free started participating again, resulting in a larger increase.

**More Lessons Learned From Two Years of Healthy School Meals for All State Implementation**

- ▶ **While Healthy School Meals for All may be helping to close the gap between breakfast and lunch, lunch participation is still outpacing breakfast.**

Breakfast participation has always lagged behind lunch participation, but participation was moving in the right direction before schools shuttered in March 2020 due to the pandemic. Healthy School Meals for All policies appear to be helping states close the gap between breakfast and lunch. [New Mexico](#) is the only state offering free meals to all their students that is reaching at least 70 students that receive a free or reduced-price lunch with a school breakfast.

- ▶ **Participation is growing despite dropping enrollment.** Half of the states that had Healthy School Meals for All policies during the 2023–2024 school year — California, Maine, New Mexico, and Vermont — saw their enrollment decrease at schools participating in the National School Lunch Program compared to the prior year. Despite this decrease, participation increased in every state except for Vermont.



**Congress should protect and strengthen the School Nutrition Programs, not weaken them.**

At a time when millions of people throughout the country are struggling to make ends meet, Congress should be focused on strengthening the child nutrition programs. Yet, proposed cuts to school meals have been put forward for the Budget Reconciliation process. One proposal would significantly reduce the number of schools able to utilize CEP by raising the eligibility threshold for schools to participate from the current 25 percent identified student percentage (ISP) to 60 percent ISP. More than 24,000 schools, serving more than 12 million children, would no longer be eligible to participate in CEP.

Another proposal would require all families applying for school meals to provide detailed household income documentation before being approved for free or reduced-price meals. This change would put cumbersome paperwork requirements on families, and significantly increase administrative burden for schools. Requiring full-income documentation has been shown to cause eligible children to fall through the cracks. These proposals would result in large numbers of children losing access to the nutritious school meals they need.

These two proposals would negatively impact the eight states that have implemented Healthy School Meals for All, as they rely on community eligibility, and families returning school meal applications to make their policies financially feasible.



## Benefits of Healthy School Meals for All

There are many benefits to offering school breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge to families.

► **Ensures all students are hunger-free and ready to get the most out of their school day:** It is hard for students to learn and fully benefit from educational investments when they do not have the focus or energy to concentrate because they are hungry. It only takes one hungry student who cannot pay attention to disrupt learning in an entire classroom, so everyone benefits when all students are well-fed.

► **Reduces stigma in the cafeteria:** Students from households with low incomes, particularly those in middle and high school, often worry that participating in school meals will negatively identify them among their peers. As a result, students feel shame or skip meals. When all students have access to free meals, regardless of household income, any stigma about eating school meals is reduced, and the cafeteria can be a more welcoming space for everyone.

► **Ends school meal debt:** School nutrition departments no longer need to track and follow up on school meal debt, which is a significant problem for families and schools. Dealing with school meal debt takes time away from serving high-quality nutritious meals and building a sense of community in cafeterias.

► **Supports innovative service models:** When all students can eat free meals at school, it is easier for school nutrition departments to use innovative service models such as breakfast in the classroom and grab-and-go kiosks to serve more students. As participation increases, economies of scale can allow for serving more fresh produce and quality menu items that appeal to students.

► **Advances racial equity:** Healthy School Meals for All policies are critical to advancing racial equity and justice, ensuring that all students have access to the nutrition they need to succeed at school and beyond.

## Public Support for Healthy School Meals for All

In 2021, FRAC conducted nationwide public opinion polling and found that 63 percent of voters nationwide support legislation that would allow schools to offer meals to all students at no charge. Since then, several states have conducted their own state-specific polling and found public-support numbers that are even higher.

- [More than 70 percent of Minnesota voters](#) — including majorities across every ideological and demographic category — say they approve of the state legislature’s decision [in 2022] to provide free school meals to all students, regardless of income.
- [77 percent of registered New York voters](#) support state funding for Healthy School Meals for All.
- [81 percent of voters in North Carolina](#) support school meals for all.
- [87 percent of Ohio parents of school-age children](#) agree that schools should provide school meals at no cost to all students, regardless of the student’s ability to pay.
- [Eight in 10 Pennsylvanian voters](#) support expanding the state’s free breakfast program to include lunch.



## Recommendations

There are several pathways to Healthy School Meals for All, and the following strategies should be pursued to ensure all students have access to the nutrition they need:

- **Congress should pass a nationwide Healthy School Meals for All policy.** The eight states that had Healthy School Meals for All policies during the 2023–2024 school year, and the [positive polling data](#), demonstrate the public support and the benefits of serving healthy meals at no cost to students during the school day. Students in all states need access to school breakfast and lunch to grow and thrive.
- **More states should continue to pass Healthy School Meals for All policies.** States often lead the way, enacting policies that support children and families that become the models for national legislation. Until Congress acts, states can continue to pass Healthy School Meals for All legislation, which to date have passed as standalone bills, have been included in budget bills, and have been

approved by voters through a ballot measure. Healthy School Meals for All legislation has received bipartisan support in several states.

- **Several states have passed policies to expand access to free meals**, such as offering free meals to students who qualify for reduced-price meals (example, **Maryland**), expanding eligibility for free meals up to 200 percent of the poverty line (example, **North Dakota**) or 224 percent of the poverty line (example, New Jersey), providing a subsidy to CEP-eligible schools (examples, **New York, Oregon, and Washington**), and offering free breakfast to all students (examples, **Arkansas and Pennsylvania**). These policies should be seen as great first steps on the path to Healthy School Meals for All policies.
- **The Community Eligibility Provision needs to be financially viable for more schools.** In September 2023, USDA released a final rule that lowered the Community Eligibility Provision eligibility threshold

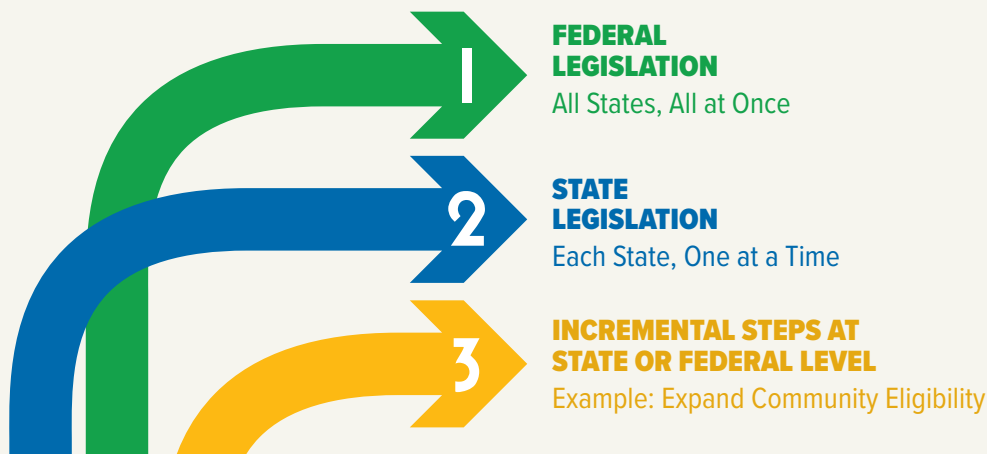
from 40 percent to 25 percent identified student percentage. This allows more high-poverty schools to serve healthy school meals to all students at no cost to families through community eligibility; however, the multiplier that determines community eligibility schools' federal reimbursement must be increased by Congress from 1.6 to 2.5 so that it is financially feasible for more eligible schools to participate.

- **School districts should take steps to increase breakfast participation.** The first eight states to implement Healthy School Meals for All policies show that even when breakfast is offered at no cost, students still participate less than they do in lunch. There are additional barriers to breakfast participation, such as students having enough time to get breakfast in the school cafeteria before the school day begins. Innovative breakfast models, such as breakfast in the classroom, “grab and go” breakfast, and second chance breakfast, can help close the gap between breakfast and lunch participation.

- **Schools need to ensure that students have enough time to eat.** Research has shown that when students have at least 20 minutes for lunch they eat more fruits and vegetables and waste less food. As participation increases and lunch lines grow with the expansion of Healthy School Meals for All, it is critical that students are allocated enough time to eat school meals. States can pass legislation requiring a minimum of 20 minutes of seat time for students during lunch, or schools can create their own policies to ensure students have enough time to eat.

Check out FRAC's guide, [Reducing Barriers to Consuming School Meals](#), for tips on changes schools can make to help students get the most out of school meals.

### Three Pathways to Healthy School Meals for All



## Technical Notes

Data in this report are collected from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and an annual survey of state child nutrition officials conducted by the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC). For consistency, all USDA data used in this report are from the states' 90-day revisions of the monthly reports.

The 90-day revisions are the final required reports from the states, but states have the option to change numbers at any time after that point.

### Student Participation

The student participation data in each state are based on daily averages of the number of breakfasts and lunches served through the available program options on school days during the nine months from September through May. FRAC calculated the number of children reached in each state during each school year by dividing the total number of breakfasts and lunches served by each state's average number of serving days during the corresponding school year.

During the 2022–2023 and 2023–2024 school years, average daily participation is based on the number of breakfasts and lunches served through the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and each state's average number of serving days in SBP and NSLP during the respective school year.

Based on information from USDA, FRAC applies a formula (divide average daily participation by an attendance factor) to adjust numbers upwards to account for children who were absent from school on a particular day. FRAC uses an attendance factor of 0.927 to adjust the average daily participation numbers in breakfast and lunch for the 2022–2023 and 2023–2024 school years.



## Endnotes

1 Vermont was the only state of the first cohort to see a decrease in breakfast participation. This decrease — 633 kids on an average day — is a result of dropping enrollment. Just over 13,000 fewer children attended schools that offered NSLP in the 2023–2024 school year compared to the 2022–2023 school year.

2 This calculation is based off [enrollment at schools participating in the Community Eligibility Provision](#) during the 2023–2024 school year combined with enrollment at schools in states that have implemented Healthy School Meals for All policies.



**Table 1:** Total Average Daily Participation — Cohort 1: Second Year of Implementation

State	School Year 2018–2019			School Year 2022–2023			School Year 2023–2024			Change in Participation	
	Average Daily Participation in Breakfast	Average Daily Participation in Lunch	Breakfast to Lunch Participation Ratio	Average Daily Participation in Breakfast	Average Daily Participation in Lunch	Breakfast to Lunch Participation Ratio	Average Daily Participation in Breakfast	Average Daily Participation in Lunch	Breakfast to Lunch Participation Ratio	Breakfast: School Year 2022–2023 to School Year 2023–2024	Lunch: School Year 2022–2023 to School Year 2023–2024
California	1,696,935	3,096,331	54.8	1,749,211	3,205,414	54.6	1,890,464	3,294,956	57.4	8.1%	2.8%
Maine	52,083	91,890	56.7	66,804	112,661	59.3	70,984	116,070	61.2	6.3%	3.0%
Massachusetts	213,128	510,703	41.7	265,363	592,896	44.8	292,220	619,212	47.2	10.1%	4.4%
Vermont	25,223	44,115	57.2	35,255	54,704	64.4	34,622	54,734	63.3	-1.8%	0.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,987,369</b>	<b>3,743,039</b>	<b>53.1</b>	<b>2,116,634</b>	<b>3,965,675</b>	<b>53.4</b>	<b>2,288,290</b>	<b>4,084,972</b>	<b>56.0</b>	<b>8.1%</b>	<b>3.0%</b>

**Table 2:** Total Average Daily Participation — Cohort 2: First Year of Implementation

State	School Year 2018–2019			School Year 2022–2023			School Year 2023–2024			Change in Participation	
	Average Daily Participation in Breakfast	Average Daily Participation in Lunch	Breakfast to Lunch Participation Ratio	Average Daily Participation in Breakfast	Average Daily Participation in Lunch	Breakfast to Lunch Participation Ratio	Average Daily Participation in Breakfast	Average Daily Participation in Lunch	Breakfast to Lunch Participation Ratio	Breakfast: School Year 2022–2023 to School Year 2023–2024	Lunch: School Year 2022–2023 to School Year 2023–2024
Colorado	168,551	346,838	48.6	140,097	341,686	41.0	191,940	441,035	43.5	37.0%	29.1%
Michigan	401,241	782,133	51.3	409,170	773,811	52.9	505,338	875,410	57.7	23.5%	13.1%
Minnesota	239,437	577,355	41.5	227,474	575,079	39.6	309,897	648,575	47.8	36.2%	12.8%
New Mexico	142,115	206,006	69.0	125,497	184,352	68.1	140,804	201,463	69.9	12.2%	9.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>951,344</b>	<b>1,912,332</b>	<b>49.7</b>	<b>902,238</b>	<b>1,874,929</b>	<b>48.1</b>	<b>1,147,979</b>	<b>2,166,483</b>	<b>53.0</b>	<b>27.2%</b>	<b>15.6%</b>

**Table 3:** Healthy School Meals for All Participation Across 8 States

State	School Year 2018–2019		School Year 2022–2023		School Year 2023–2024		Change in Participation	
	Average Daily Participation in Breakfast	Average Daily Participation in Lunch	Average Daily Participation in Breakfast	Average Daily Participation in Lunch	Average Daily Participation in Breakfast	Average Daily Participation in Lunch	Breakfast: School Year 2022–2023 to School Year 2023–2024	Lunch: School Year 2022–2023 to School Year 2023–2024
California	1,696,935	3,096,331	1,749,211	3,205,414	1,890,464	3,294,956	8.1%	2.8%
Maine	52,083	91,890	66,804	112,661	70,984	116,070	6.3%	3.0%
Massachusetts	213,128	510,703	265,363	592,896	292,220	619,212	10.1%	4.4%
Vermont	25,223	44,115	35,255	54,704	34,622	54,734	-1.8%	0.1%
Colorado	168,551	346,838	140,097	341,686	191,940	441,035	37.0%	29.1%
Michigan	401,241	782,133	409,170	773,811	505,338	875,410	23.5%	13.1%
Minnesota	239,437	577,355	227,474	575,079	309,897	648,575	36.2%	12.8%
New Mexico	142,115	206,006	125,497	184,352	140,804	201,463	12.2%	9.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,938,713</b>	<b>5,655,371</b>	<b>3,018,872</b>	<b>5,840,604</b>	<b>3,436,269</b>	<b>6,251,456</b>	<b>13.8%</b>	<b>7.0%</b>



**Food Research & Action Center**

Washington, DC 20036

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