



# Healthy School Meals for All State Advocacy Guide:

Reducing Childhood Hunger  
Through Innovative Policy

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## Reducing Childhood Hunger Through Innovative Policy

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This guide was created by Alexis Bylander with contributions from Crystal FitzSimons, Clarissa Hayes, Erin Kennedy Hysom, Nathan Garcia, and Grace O'Connor.

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- Hunger Free Vermont
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- Maryland Hunger Solutions
- North Carolina Alliance for Health
- Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon
- Prairie Action ND
- Project Bread
- School Nutrition Association of Pennsylvania
- Tennessee Justice Center
- The Center for Black Health and Equity
- The Food Group

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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 by 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).

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# Why Healthy School Meals for All

## Introduction

State Healthy School Meals for All policies provide funding for schools to offer school breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost, regardless of the student's household income. As of 2025, nine states have passed such policies, and more than 20 others have introduced legislation. This progress has occurred in less than five years and demonstrates the momentum and support for Healthy School Meals for All.

Healthy School Meals for All policies are important because food insecurity continues to be a problem in the U.S. Approximately 13.8 million children live in food insecure households, and research shows that [hunger negatively impacts children's health and learning](#). The federal child nutrition programs play an incredible role in reducing hunger and supporting health. In fact, [a study](#) from Tufts University showed that school meals are the healthiest source of food for children.

State policies build off the federal school breakfast and lunch programs, dedicating state funds to support the costs of the meals served to children who are not certified to receive free school meals. Children in households with incomes above 130 percent of the federal poverty level do not qualify for free school meals. Many children who would benefit from access to free school meals live in households that are struggling but above the eligibility threshold. During the 2025–2026 school year, a family of three making over \$34,645 would not qualify.

At the federal level, legislation has been introduced in both chambers of Congress that would make school meals available at no charge to all students nationwide, but the bills have yet to receive bipartisan support or gain traction. Nationwide Healthy School Meals for All is the long-term goal, but states should not wait for congressional action. Students experiencing hunger need access to free school meals to learn and thrive now.

If you are ready for your state to pass a Healthy School Meals for All policy, this guide is for you. It pulls together learnings, tactics, and resources from states that have passed policies, along with best practices for increasing participation in school meal programs.

## Introduction

### The Current System Is Not Meeting the Need

### The Height of the Pandemic Served as a Successful Nationwide Pilot

### States Are Leading the Way

### State Policy Adoption Timeline

[Research](#) links participation in school meals to positive educational and health outcomes for our nation's children such as:



#### IMPROVING

academic achievement, attendance, and student behavior at school;



#### DECREASING

childhood food insecurity;



#### EATING

more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and milk; and



#### REDUCING

visits to the school nurse.

## The Current System Is Not Meeting the Need

School meals are critical to ensuring students have the energy and focus they need to get the most out of their school day. They also help households with low incomes stretch their food budgets at home, making it easier for families to serve more — and often healthier — meals in the evenings and on weekends.

Schools use household income information from meal applications to determine whether students qualify for free, reduced-price, or paid meals.

While the system may sound simple, it includes several pain points that lead to problems like children in need missing out on meals, stigma in the cafeteria, burdensome paperwork for families and school staff, and unpaid school meal debt.

Charging students different prices for the same meals leads to the following problems:

- **Not all families fill out school meal forms.** To qualify for free or reduced-price school meals, families need to fill out a school meal form annually. Language or literacy barriers, fear of completing the form incorrectly, or concern over being identified as a low-income household prevents some families from submitting them. Additionally, it can be hard for parents or guardians to gather all the necessary paperwork to show annual income, if, for example, they have multiple part-time jobs or seasonal employment. The form requires households to not only disclose their employment income but also information about money they receive from child support, alimony, government assistance, and other income streams. Families may feel embarrassed or unwilling to share that level of information with their child's school.

**NOTES:**

[illegible]

“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 and lunch most days so that I wouldn’t feel the stigma of getting the school meal.”

**— COLORADO SCHOOL FOOD SERVICES EMPLOYEE**



- **Some families cannot afford to pay the reduced-price fee.** Children eligible for reduced-price meals are from households between 130 percent and 185 percent of the federal poverty level. They pay a maximum of 30 cents for breakfast and 40 cents for lunch. While those rates may seem low to some, they can be more than families can afford. A school food service director once observed, “if you think 40 cents is not a barrier to participation, you do not understand hunger in America.”
- **Stigma can be associated with eating school meals.** When students are divided into free, reduced-price, and paid eligibility categories, school meals can be perceived as a program that predominantly serves children from low-income households. Many years ago, it was common for schools to distribute different colored tickets or have students stand in different serving lines to denote whether they were receiving free, reduced-price or paid meals. Those practices are not allowed today, and instead, students typically have a pin number they enter in a point-of-sale machine at the end of the serving line but, kids are often hyper-aware of what eligibility category they are in. The school cafeteria’s culture can see positive changes when meals are offered at no charge.
- **Unpaid school meal debt is a problem for families and schools.** When students cannot pay for school meals, they accrue school meal debt. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) requires schools to have policies in place to address unpaid meal fees. Schools must make reasonable efforts to collect unpaid debt and are not allowed to use federal funds to pay it off. Schools are under tremendous pressure to collect school meal debt so they do not have to divert funding meant for other purposes to cover the cost. According to numerous accounts from students and families around the country, this has led to students being shamed and embarrassed for their parents’ struggling to make ends meet and carrying meal debt.
- **School cafeteria staff are on the front line of student hunger.** The people working in school cafeterias are often the lowest paid employees in a school. When students go through the line and do not have money to pay for their meal, the school food staff need to decide if they will take the meal away from them, let the student accrue debt, or pay for the meal themselves. Many school nutrition staff report using their own money to cover the cost of lunch for students who can’t afford it and might go hungry. While this is admirable, it is not a fair or sustainable solution.
- **Determining student eligibility takes time away from producing quality meals.** The time that school nutrition professionals spend gathering school meal applications, processing them, and collecting school meal debt is time taken away from producing high-quality school meals that are healthy, taste good, and are appealing to students.

What are the biggest challenges with current school meal operations in **your** state?

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## The Height of the Pandemic Served as a Successful Nationwide Pilot

As part of our nation’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, USDA allowed schools across the country to offer meals to all their students at no charge, and the federal government covered the cost. The option remained in place from the spring of 2020 through the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 school years.

Free school meals for all students during the pandemic served as a trial run for a national Healthy School Meals for All policy for over two school years. Students, parents, teachers, administrators, advocates, and policymakers saw the benefits of free school meals for all and did not want to go back to charging students different prices for the same meals.

## States Are Leading the Way

As of 2025, nine states — California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Michigan, New Mexico, New York, and Vermont — have Healthy School Meals for All.

These policies have passed through stand-alone bills, part of larger budget bills, and in one state, through a ballot measure.

Stand-alone Bills	Budget Bills	Ballot Measure
Maine	California	Colorado
Minnesota	Massachusetts	
New Mexico	New York	
Vermont	Michigan	



During the height of the pandemic, some communities used school buses to deliver school meals to students.



Colorado advocates organize support for Proposition FF on the ballot.

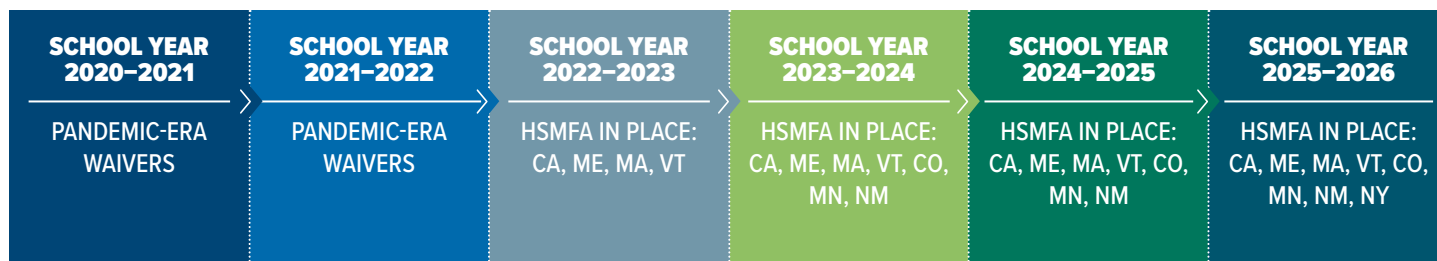
**NOTES:**



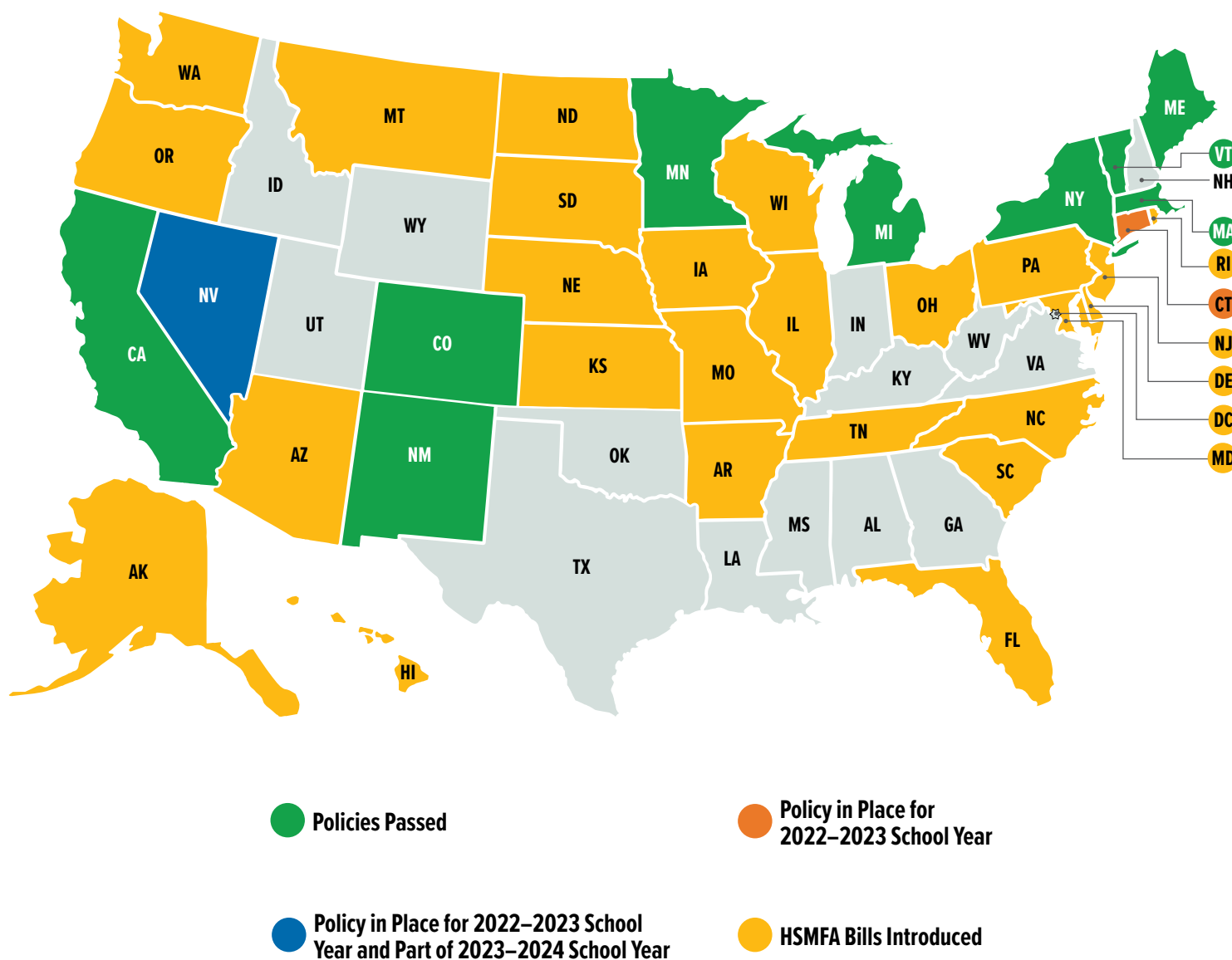
### School meals should remain free for all children — today and always

A July 2021 op-ed by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in *The Hill*, a national media outlet, called for school meals to permanently be available to all children at no charge.

## State Policy Adoption Timeline



Connecticut and Nevada used COVID-19 relief funds to temporarily offer free meals to all students after the pandemic-era waivers from USDA ended.



# Building a Coalition

Healthy School Meals for All is a policy issue that brings people together. Organizations support it for a range of reasons, from ending childhood hunger to improving health and educational outcomes to supporting working families.

## Coalition Members

Because this issue resonates with so many people and organizations, state Healthy School Meals for All coalitions tend to be large. **The following are examples of individuals and organizations that have joined existing state coalitions:**

- anti-hunger advocacy organizations
- food banks and food pantries
- school business officials and state Association of School Business Officials (ASBO) affiliates (find a state ASBO affiliate [here](#))
- school nurses
- parents and Parent Teacher Associations/ Organizations (PTAs/PTOs)
- teachers and teacher unions
- food service professionals and the unions that represent them
- state chapters of the School Nutrition Association (find a state association [here](#))
- child advocacy organizations
- farm to school groups
- religious organizations
- health insurance companies and health-focused organizations
- pediatricians and the state's chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (find a state chapter [here](#))
- students
- principals
- superintendents
- school board members
- and many more!

## Coalition Members

## Naming a Coalition

## Coalition Models

## Coalition Group Agreements and Decision-Making

## Engaging Students

What three groups would **you** reach out to first to start a coalition?

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**CIRCLE THE GROUPS YOU ENVISION PARTICIPATING IN YOUR COALITION**

Each coalition member can bring different perspectives, resources, and contributions to the campaign. Here are some examples:

- staff time or funding;
- lending their name and brand to the cause;
- providing communications or lobbying support;
- making in-kind contributions, such as covering the cost of polling, paid media, events, or youth stipends;
- testifying at legislative hearings and/or recruiting people from their network to testify;
- writing and submitting letters-to-the-editor in their local newspaper;
- identifying additional community champions to grow the coalition;
- conducting community outreach;
- adding their name to and circulating sign-on letters;
- participating in lobby visits; and
- helping with story collection.

**NOTES:**

## Naming a Coalition

In 2021, FRAC conducted nationwide public opinion polling and message testing about offering school meals to all students at no charge.

The survey found that the following phrases appealed to voters:

- **Feed the Kids**
- **Hunger-Free Schools**
- **Healthy School Meals for All**
- **Hunger-Free Students**

The polling also found that the word “universal” did not make a positive impression on most people. However, by the time the polling was completed, Vermont’s Universal School Meals campaign was up and running, and was ultimately successful, which shows that knowing your state and target audience is key.

State campaigns to date have come up with creative coalition names, slogans, and visuals that convey their purpose and appeal to their target audience. Here are some examples.



## Coalition Models

Each coalition needs to decide how they will operate and make decisions. **Here are some examples of different models to consider:**

- All members have an equal voice, and all decisions are made by consensus or by majority vote.
- One organization leads the coalition, contributing more resources than the others and retaining most of the decision-making on strategy.
- The coalition is led by two or more organizations that play a larger role in strategy decisions. Those organizations may be co-chairs or serve on an executive or steering committee.

Several coalitions have created smaller working groups within the coalition that meet outside of coalition meetings to focus on policy writing, lobbying, communications, or grassroots outreach.

## Coalition Group Agreements and Decision-Making

Members of a Healthy School Meals for All coalition should commit their public support to passing state Healthy School Meals for All legislation.

It also is important for all coalition members to know how decisions, particularly around strategy, will be made in the group. Creating these agreements up front is important, because campaigns often have to make time-sensitive decisions. **Here are some questions to consider as you build your coalition:**

- How will decisions be made in the coalition?
- Do some members have more decision-making power than others?
- What strategic lines are you not willing to cross as a group? What are the dealbreakers?
- Is contributing funding or in-kind resources a requirement of coalition membership?
- Do members need to contribute resources equally?
- Do all members agree to put their logo on coalition materials?
- How will group materials such as fact sheets and press releases be written and approved?
- Will individuals be able to join the coalition or is it only for organizations?



Feed the Kids buttons used in Minnesota's Hunger-Free Schools campaign

What coalition model do you envision for **your** state?

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## Engaging Students

Healthy School Meals for All campaigns are a natural fit for authentically engaging youth in the policymaking process. Many students care about school meals, both the food served and the experience they and their peers have in the school cafeteria. They know what is currently working and what could be improved. **The following are roles and activities well suited for youth.**

### Youth Roles

- Participate as coalition members.
- Serve as youth advisors to the campaign.
- Participate in youth focus groups or key informant interviews that shape the campaign.
- Create paid positions such as internships or advisors within the campaign. (The Oregon School Meals for All coalition incorporated several paid Youth Advisory Leader positions into their campaign. The youth helped shape the policy language, oversaw engaging other students in the work, and helped plan the coalition's lobby day at the capitol).

### Youth Activities

- Testify at legislative hearings.
- Speak at press conferences and events.
- Attend lobby visits.
- Submit letters-to-the-editor to their local newspapers.
- Write and sign group letters to elected officials.
- Plan and/or attend coalition lobby days.
- Design campaign materials.
- Help at outreach events.
- Speak at celebratory events when the policy passes.

### NOTES:



Youth advocates in Oregon and New York speak at campaign events.

## Considerations for Working With Youth

Many policy campaigns want to engage youth, but doing so in a way that is meaningful for both the cause and the students takes thoughtful planning. **Here are some best practices for youth engagement:**

- **Make sure the messages that youth are asked to deliver are appropriate for their age and experience.** For example, it makes sense for students to talk about what they see happening in their school cafeterias and what impact offering school meals to all students at no charge would have on student health and learning. It likely doesn't make sense for them to talk about maximizing federal reimbursements through the Community Eligibility Provision and Provision 2, or the federal eligibility for free meals at 130 percent of the federal poverty level not being adequate to address the need. Make sure to ask them to speak about issues that they can easily and authentically discuss.
- **Involve students through the entire policymaking process.** If possible, engage youth as members of, or advisors to, the campaign throughout the whole process, instead of bringing them in for one isolated component.
- **Bring a trauma-informed lens to requests of youth.** Asking anyone, but particularly youth, to talk about experiences with hunger and food insecurity or shame associated with unpaid meal debt is a big emotional ask. Never pressure youth to talk about issues they are not comfortable with. Follow their lead about what they are willing to share.
- **Include a diversity of youth perspectives.** Healthy School Meals for All policies are a win for students of all ages, race, gender, and socioeconomic status. If possible, include youth in your campaign that represent a variety of perspectives and demographics.
- **Set students up for success.** Youth that volunteer or have paid positions within your campaign may be working on issue advocacy for the first time. Make sure to give them clear directions and manageable projects so they can be successful.
- **Make sure youth involvement is a win for both them and the campaign.** Youth lend a powerful voice to Healthy School Meals for All campaigns. Make sure they benefit from being a part of the experience as well. This may include providing training opportunities and experiences in public speaking, media interviews, or the legislative process, stipends, or individual gift cards, or giving a financial contribution to their school or club.

### NOTES:

# Writing Healthy School Meals for All Legislation

## Key Legislative Language

The core component of a state Healthy School Meals for All policy is funding to cover the gap between what schools receive in meal reimbursements from the federal government and what they need to cover the cost of offering meals to all students. **The following components make Healthy School Meals for All bills strong and sustainable:**

- **Allocate funding to reimburse schools at the federal free reimbursement rate for all meals served.** The state policies that have passed to date reimburse schools for the difference between the federal reduced-price or paid rate and the free rate.
- **Require schools to maximize federal reimbursements.** When schools maximize the federal reimbursements for school meals before utilizing state funding, it helps keep the cost to the state as low as possible. The best way to do this is for schools to participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (if eligible), or use Provision 2, both of which reduce administrative costs and support the financial viability of the school meal programs.

## Key Legislative Language

### Additional Bill Considerations

### Determining the Cost of Your Policy

### Funding Mechanisms

### Incremental Policy Steps Towards Healthy School Meals for All

### New York's Path to School Meals for All



## The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)

Community eligibility schools are high-poverty schools that offer free breakfast and lunch to all students. Instead of collecting school meal applications, CEP schools receive federal reimbursements for the meals they serve based on the percentage of students that are considered “identified students.”

Any school, group of schools in a district, or district with 25 percent or more “identified students” are eligible to participate. Identified students are students directly certified for free school meals through data matching because their households receive SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations benefits, and in most states, Medicaid benefits (combined with an income test); and children who are certified for free school meals without an application because they are unhoused, migrant, runaway, enrolled in Head Start, or in foster care.

These schools do not have to collect, process, or verify school meal applications, or keep track of meals by fee category, resulting in less administrative burden for school food service staff. Offering all students school meals at no charge increases participation.

- NOTES:**

- **Include public schools, along with charter schools and private schools as appropriate, in the policy.** Allowing any school that participates in the National School Lunch Program to participate in the state's Healthy School Meals for All policy will reach the maximum number of students.



Schools using Provision 2 (referring to a provision of the National School Lunch Act) do not need to collect, process, or verify school meal applications or keep track of a meals by fee category for at least three out of every four years. Schools collect school meal applications, and count and claim meals by fee category during year one of the multiyear cycle, called the “base year.” That data will then determine the federal reimbursement and are used for future years in the cycle. Provision 2 schools have the option to serve only breakfast or lunch, or both breakfast and lunch, to all students at no charge, and use economies of scale from increased participation and significant administrative savings to offset the cost of offering free meals to all students. Unlike CEP, any school can use Provision 2.

Depending on your state legislative landscape and the interests of the bill sponsor and Healthy School Meals for All coalition, **the following components could be added to the legislative language:**

- There are advantages and disadvantages to adding more elements to your Healthy School Meals for All bill. Adding to the legislation can improve school meal programs and bring more advocates to the table. On the other hand, it can increase the cost of the legislation and may create mandates that are non-starters in some states, or create opposition.

What bill components will be a priority for **your** campaign?

[illegible]

When designing your Healthy School Meals for All policy, you may want to consider including funding to cover the cost of milk for students who only want that one item. To receive federal reimbursement, schools must serve meals that include all the components required by USDA, so students cannot go through the line and only pick up one item. Including state funding to cover the cost of milk for students that bring meals from home can help prevent confusion from families who know that meals are offered free and do not understand why their child cannot pick up milk without getting the entire meal.

## Healthy School Meals for All States' Legislation Overview

State	Requires all schools participating in the National School Lunch Program to offer free school meals	Requires all schools to maximize federal reimbursements	Requires schools to conduct SNAP outreach	Requires the state child nutrition agency to provide technical assistance to CEP applicants	Schools included in policy
California	Yes (except private schools)	Requires high poverty schools (40% ISP or higher) to use CEP or Provision 2	No	No	Public and charter schools
Colorado	No (participation is voluntary)	Yes	No	No	Public and charter schools
Maine	Yes	Yes (policy was revised to now require schools to use CEP and Provision 2)	No	Yes	Public, charter, and eligible private schools
Massachusetts	Yes	Yes	No	No	Public, charter, and eligible private schools
Michigan	Yes	Yes	No	No	Public and charter schools
Minnesota	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Public, charter, and eligible private schools
New Mexico	Yes	Yes	No	No	Public, charter, and eligible private schools
New York	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Public, charter, and eligible private schools
Vermont	Yes	Yes	No	No	Public and eligible private schools*

\*There are no charter schools in Vermont.

## Determining the Cost of Your Policy

The cost of your state's Healthy School Meals for All policy should be determined by your state's budget office or your legislature's fiscal office. They are a credible source of information for policymakers and the public, and they have access to the detailed state data necessary to make accurate estimates.

Before you have an official estimate from those offices, you may be interested in drafting your own estimate to help inform your campaign.

**Here is some guidance to keep in mind:**

- Not all students will eat school meals, even when they are free.** No school will have every one of their students eating school breakfast and school lunch every day, even if the meals are offered at no charge. Determining the cost of the legislation by taking the total number of students in the state and multiplying it by the cost of offering a breakfast and lunch to each student will drastically overestimate the cost of the legislation.
- Be sure to factor in average daily attendance.** A school attendance factor represents the average percentage of enrolled students who attend school on any given day. Not all enrolled students are present at school each day so the attendance factor informs how many students could possibly eat school breakfast or lunch throughout the school year. Your state may already have an attendance factor, likely around .9 to .95, it uses for education-related financial modeling.
- CEP schools are unlikely to see large participation changes.** Schools currently utilizing the Community Eligibility Provision are already offering free meals to all their students so the passage of a state policy is unlikely to change their participation numbers as significantly as schools that charge for meals.
- School meal participation overall will increase significantly.** As a sign of how popular and needed this policy is, states with Healthy School Meals for All policies have seen school meal participation rates higher than they initially expected. School meal participation during the pandemic, when school meals were offered free nationwide, was not a good predictor of participation once states passed Healthy School Meals for All policies because too many variables were at play during that time period. Early adopters of Healthy School Meals for All like California, Maine, Massachusetts, and Vermont passed their policies before they went back to pre-pandemic operations so the first year of their policy implementation followed more than two years of nationwide free school meals. Even though meals had been offered free for years, they still saw participation increases.

FRAC's report, [The State of Healthy School Meals for All: Eight States Show the Nation What Is Possible](#), shows what first-year participation looked like in Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, and New Mexico (as well as participation in the four early adopting states).

### NOTES:

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

State	Pre-Pandemic Operations (SCHOOL YEAR 2018–2019)			Pandemic Waivers (SCHOOL YEAR 2022–2023)			HSMFA Implementation (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>

## Funding Mechanisms

Most states to date have used money from their general fund to cover the cost of their Healthy School Meals for All policy.

Colorado's ballot measure (Proposition FF), however, increased state income taxes paid by households with at least \$300,000 in federal adjusted gross income by limiting the amount of money they can deduct from their Colorado taxable income.

### NOTES:

In some states, it may make sense to take incremental steps toward a Healthy School Meals for All policy. And during an advocacy campaign, it may become clear that passing a full policy in a legislative session isn't possible, but progress could be made towards it. **Here are a few examples to consider, with the most impactful policies listed first:**

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## School meal tray in Bismarck Public Schools

If **your** campaign had to take an incremental step towards Healthy School Meals for All, which one would be best?

[illegible]

## NOTES:

As incremental policy steps pass, it's important to frame the wins as progress toward the ultimate goal of Healthy School Meals for All, and not an end to the campaign.

## A large group of people, including students and adults, posing in a grand hall with ornate architecture. Many are holding signs that read "HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS" and "I support free school meals for all NY kids". Some signs also mention "Fund free meals for all".

New York advocates gather for event at the state capitol.



Finding funding to support your coalition work is a key step to building your campaign. Strong coalitions often need dedicated staff time, earned and social media placement, public opinion polling, lobbying time, outreach events, partner stipends, and promotional materials.

- Be a member of the coalition?
- Allow you to retain decision-making authority in the campaign?
- Support direct and grassroots lobbying?
- Be on board with additional groups supporting the campaign?
- Help recruit other funders to fully cover the cost of the campaign?
- Offer unrestricted funds that allow flexibility to use the dollars as needed?
- Provide funding for multiple years if needed?

- coalition member operating budgets
- food manufacturing and marketing companies
- foundations with a focus on health or child nutrition
- health insurance companies

- building a strong coalition
- creating materials
- shaping legislative language
- meeting with legislators
- creating and placing earned media
- conducting community outreach events, and more
- conducting public opinion polling

What would be the first organization **you** would approach for support?

[illegible]

## Building a Campaign Website

Creating a website is an important step in your campaign. It serves as a place for policymakers, the media, and the public to learn more about the issue, the organizations supporting the campaign, how to get involved, and who to contact with questions. Campaign websites can be set up quickly and easily with free website building tools or be more complex if your budget allows. **Here are steps to building your campaign website:**

- **Choose a domain name.** It helps to have a name that is easy to remember, simple to find online, and visually appealing on campaign materials. Be sure to check if the domain is available and, if so, register it. Here are some examples of domain names state campaigns have selected.

### California

[www.SchoolMealsForAll.org](http://www.SchoolMealsForAll.org)

### Colorado

[www.FuelColoradoKids.org](http://www.FuelColoradoKids.org)

### Massachusetts

[www.FeedKidsMA.org](http://www.FeedKidsMA.org)

### Maryland

[www.HealthySchoolMealsForAllMD.org](http://www.HealthySchoolMealsForAllMD.org)

### New York

[www.SchoolMealsForAllNY.org](http://www.SchoolMealsForAllNY.org)

### Oregon

[www.SchoolMealsOregon.org](http://www.SchoolMealsOregon.org)

What would **your** ideal website domain name be?

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- **Build the content on your site.** Your site should be the place for people to find information about the campaign and how they can get involved. If you do not have dedicated staff time to keep the website up-to-date with the latest news, choose content for the website that will not become outdated such as:

- names of the organizations that make up your coalition
- facts about child food insecurity in your state
- the benefits of providing school meals at no charge to all students in your state
- a link to the legislation you are championing
- a fact sheet about the bill
- a contact person that people can reach if they want to join the campaign and a spokesperson for media inquiries
- links to your campaign social media accounts

**If you have staff time to maintain the website on a consistent basis, you could consider including the following on the site:**

- upcoming events
- press releases and coalition statements
- updates on how your bill is moving through the legislative process
- an action alert platform people can use to send a message of support for Healthy School Meals for All directly to their state legislators
- a form to collect firsthand accounts of what free school meals would mean for the families in your state (remember to get their permission to incorporate their stories into your advocacy work)
- news articles about the campaign
- **Include your campaign website URL on all your materials.** As your coalition creates materials, talks to community groups, and meets with legislators, use your campaign website as a place for people to go for more information and ways to get involved.

## Campaign Activities

There are many tactics you can use throughout the legislative process to gain support for Healthy School Meals for All, such as:

### Advocacy Days at the Capitol

Highlight the strength of your coalition and connect directly with lawmakers by gathering at the capitol for a day of lobby visits. This allows you to raise awareness for your issue and gives policymakers faces to connect to the cause. They can talk to the students, families, school nutrition professionals, and education stakeholders that want to see Healthy School Meals for All become a reality.

### Virtual Days of Action

The advantage of virtual days of action is that they can be cheaper and logistically easier to coordinate than in-person events. Plan virtual days of action at key milestones during the legislative process. Ask your coalition and community members to use the day to call or email their policymakers and ask them to support Healthy School Meals for All and post their call to action on social media. This could also be a good time to mail in supporter postcards or other campaign materials such as sign-on letters that you have been collecting.

### Listening Sessions With Community Members and Elected Officials

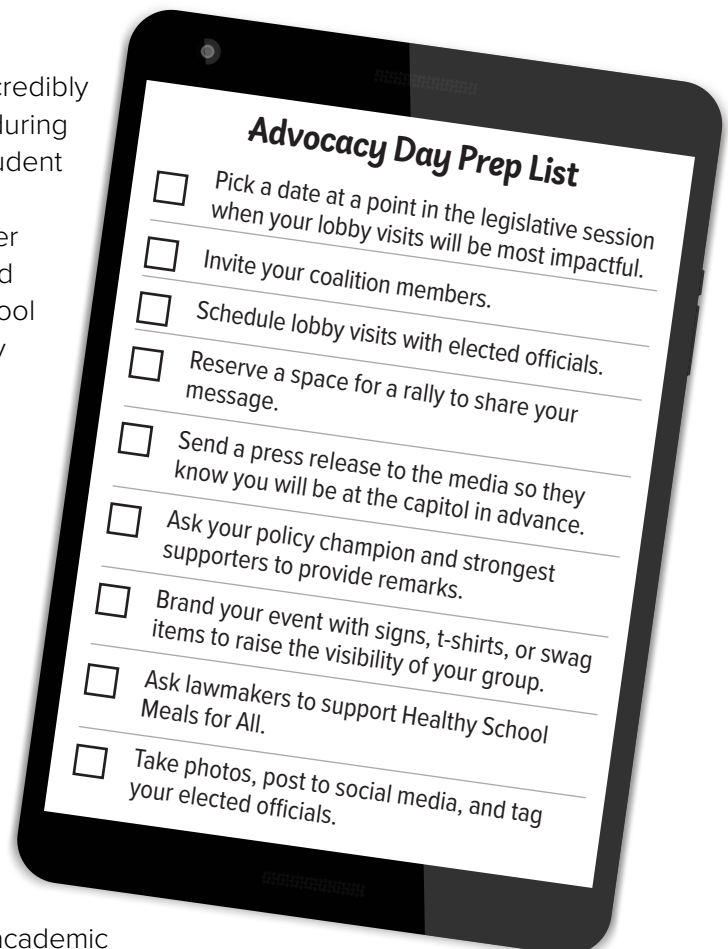
The Minnesota Hunger-Free Schools coalition hosted an incredibly meaningful listening session with the Lieutenant Governor during their campaign, giving her the opportunity to hear from a student experiencing food insecurity, a mother whose budget was stretched to the breaking point, a school food service worker who saw children in need every day in the cafeteria line, and other stakeholders that conveyed the need for Healthy School Meals for All. Listening sessions such as these can be a way to build strong relationships with policymakers and create a platform for them to hear a range of firsthand stories from people in their community that can inform their thinking.

### Policymaker Site Visits to School Cafeterias

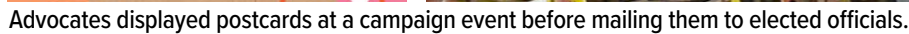
Many people think that the school meal program they experienced as a student represents school meal programs everywhere when, in fact, there are a wide range of school meal operations, and the landscape is ever-evolving. Inviting elected officials to see a school cafeteria in their community is a great way to highlight the innovative practices at work as well as the challenges schools and nutrition departments face. Invite them in, show them around, explain what they are seeing, and have them talk with students, food service staff, teachers, and administrators. End the visit by encouraging them to support strong school meal operations and student academic success by passing a Healthy School Meals for All policy.



The Oregon campaign put together a graphic to show stakeholders how far along their school meals for all bill was in the legislative process.



Simple tactics can have a big impact. Design a postcard in support of Healthy School Meals for All and have community members write out their reason for wanting the policy. Ask them to include their name and address so you can easily address the postcards to their legislators and/or the governor.

[illegible]

The collage features several 'Thank you' cards for school meals, each with the 'School Meals' logo and a handwritten note. The cards are arranged in a layered, overlapping fashion. The central card is a yellow one with a blue and white logo that says 'Free school meals help us learn and succeed!'. Other cards are blue and white, with text like 'Thank you for supporting my school meals for my NY kids' and 'As New York kids, we agree: every student should get free meals in every school because...'. The handwritten notes are in various colors of ink (blue, black, green, red) and express gratitude and support for the program. Some notes mention how the meals help with learning and health, while others simply say 'Thank you' or 'I love my school meals'.

**www.frac.org**

# Campaign Communications

## Conducting Public Opinion Polling

Public opinion polling allows advocates to identify the baseline level of support in the state for a Healthy School Meals for All policy and test messages to find out which resonate most with the target audience.

FRAC conducted public opinion polling in 2021 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.
- [79 percent](#) of **North Dakotans** support universal free school meals.
- [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.
- [84 percent](#) of **Oregon** voters support state spending to ensure free breakfast and lunch for students in kindergarten through 12th grade.
- [Eight in 10](#) **Pennsylvanian** voters support expanding the state’s free breakfast program to include lunch.

Elected officials like to vote for bills that they know are supported by their constituents. Positive public opinion polling can help demonstrate their constituents’ support of the issue and be helpful in securing the elected official’s support.

## Conducting Public Opinion Polling

### Messaging

### Framing Healthy School Meals for All as an Investment

### Communication Opportunities

### Collecting Powerful Quotes of Support

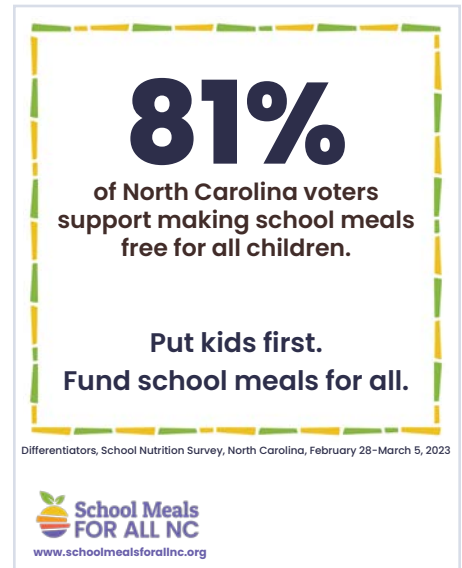
### Submitting Letters to the Editor

### Responses to Opposition Messages

### Common steps for conducting public opinion polling include:

- **Hire a polling firm.** Find a group that is known for quality results and viewed as nonpartisan.
- **Select the demographics you want in your sample.** Consider what makeup of gender, race, age, and political party affiliation you want to see in your polling sample. You may decide to limit the sample to people who vote in elections, parents, specifically parents of public school students, or other distinct groups.
- **Select what messages to test.** This could include people's opinions about school meals, their perspective on current federal eligibility thresholds for free and reduced-price school meals, whether or not they would support legislation that would make free school meals available to all students, coalition names and slogans that appeal to them, the positive impacts they believe would result from Healthy School Meals for All, or what groups they think would benefit most from such a policy.
- **Shape and approve the survey tool.** Consider if the questions asked are neutral, unbiased, and clearly worded. Avoid leading or loaded questions. Decide if you will collect responses online, via phone, or in person. Each approach has pros and cons and can affect data quality and representativeness. If the survey is conducted online, is there a process to detect and delete answers submitted by bots? Can the questions be asked in more than one language, if needed?
- **Conduct the survey, review the results, and decide how to incorporate them into the campaign.** Consider how you will share the poll findings on public support for providing all students with school meals at no charge. The percentage of different groups (voters, Republicans, Democrats, Independents, parents, women, etc.) in support of Healthy School Meals for All can often help garner broader support. Feedback on the perceived benefits of offering free school meals to all students can help shape coalition messaging.

If the coalition cannot afford to do its own public opinion poll, look for an existing poll happening in the state that you could add questions to about your issue. Another option is to organize focus groups, key informant interviews, or online polls to collect feedback. These methods may not yield results from a representative sample but still provide valuable insights.



The North Carolina coalition turned their topline polling result into an image that can be easily shared.

#### NOTES:

There are so many strong arguments for Healthy School Meals for All. You know your state landscape best and likely have a sense of what messages will resonate with your target audience. If you have the resources to do message testing or focus groups, those results can influence your campaign communications as well. **Here are some messages that seem to resonate across states:**

- List the messages that would resonate most in **your** state:

[illegible]

- **Make innovative service models easier to run.** The time that school nutrition professionals spend gathering school meal applications, processing them, and collecting school meal debt is time taken away from producing high-quality school meals that taste good and are appealing to students. When all students have access to free school meals, school food service departments can focus on serving the best meals possible and building positive relationships with students.
- **Support innovative service models.** It is easier to implement service models such as breakfast in the classroom or “grab and go” kiosks throughout the school when schools do not need to charge students for the meals.
- **Support parents and caregivers.** Having school meals available at no cost to all students saves parents, in all income brackets, the time, money, and stress of making sure their children eat breakfast at home before school and packing lunches.
- **Increase household food budgets.** When students can access breakfast and lunch at school, families have more room in their household food budgets to offer better or more food in the evenings and on weekends. Healthy School Meals for All policies can improve food security for entire families.
- **Support area agriculture with local food purchasing.** When school meals are offered at no cost, participation increases. By increasing school meal participation and providing state subsidies, Healthy School Meals for All policies bolster school nutrition finances and nutrition departments’ ability to purchase better quality items, such as local agricultural products.

## Framing Healthy School Meals for All as an Investment

Framing the cost of the legislation as “an investment” can be a key messaging strategy for your campaign. For example, using “our state needs to make an investment to ensure all students have what they need to be successful at school” instead of “our state needs to spend money each year to cover the cost of the policy” may resonate better with legislators. It is also important to clarify that Healthy School Meals for All policies “offer” meals at no charge to students, instead of “provide.” This addresses the fear that some people have that meals will be given to each student, regardless of whether they want it or not. That is not the case: Healthy School Meals for All policies mean that students have the option of taking a meal if they want one and using the word “offer” instead of “provide” is a better way to convey it.

### NOTES:



New York Gov. Hochul tells families that the state’s policy of offering free meals to all students means more money back in their pockets.

## Communications Opportunities

There are milestone moments throughout the year that are natural communication hooks for your campaign. **You could consider submitting letters to the editor, holding events, and getting media around the following times:**

- **Back to school** is a time to highlight childhood food insecurity and call for Healthy School Meals for All to ensure all students get the most out of the year ahead.
- **National School Lunch Week**, which takes place in October, and **National School Breakfast Week**, which takes place in March, are great times to highlight that children receive their healthiest meals at school and call for school meals at no charge for all students.
- **Valentine's Day** is a great time to run a social media series about why people love the idea of Healthy School Meals for All. You can add your campaign call to action and tag elected officials in your posts.
- **Days of Action** can take place whenever you choose and can build awareness for your campaign. You can ask supporters to "Raise Your Hand for Healthy School Meals for All." People can take and post photos raising their hand in support.
- **Hunger Action Month** takes place in September and is a good time to remind your community about the rates of childhood food insecurity in your state and the need for policies that address child hunger.

### NOTES:

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Encourage stakeholders to raise their hand in support of Healthy School Meals for All



The Massachusetts campaign created this graphic for their 2022–2023 school year.

## Collecting Powerful Quotes of Support

Throughout your campaign, you will encounter people who support Healthy School Meals for All and have compelling stories to share about the impact the policy would have. Take note and incorporate their quotes, with permission, into social media series, testimony, and letters of support as appropriate. **Here are some examples:**

- “As a classroom teacher for many years, I witnessed the impact of hunger on my students. The effects weren’t only visible in fatigue and stress — I also remember high schoolers would skip lunch to avoid the stigma of the free and reduced lunch line. When we remove that stigma and create the opportunity for shared breakfast and lunches, it helps build community and leads to improved academic performance.”  
— **Rep. Courtney Neron, D-Wilsonville, Oregon**
- “We must never stop advocating for all children to have free, nutritious, breakfast and lunch, without shame and embarrassment.”  
— **Yvonne Johnson, National PTA President**
- “School Meals for All is an investment that we can’t afford to miss.”  
— **Rep. Ben Bowman, Oregon**

### NOTES:

## Submitting Letters to the Editor

Earned media is a great way to get the word out about Healthy School Meals for All. Ask your coalition members to submit letters to their local papers. Students, parents, teachers, school administrators, school nutrition professionals and community members make great authors for letters to the editor. You can offer to help people summarize their experiences or perspectives into a letter, typically around 200 words, or host letter-to-the-editor writing events. When a letter is published in the paper, share it with elected officials that represent the community so they can see the support that exists in their district.



There are numerous benefits associated with Healthy School Meals for All policies. **The following are messages to use in response to people who may initially object:**

## RESPONSES:

- **The eligibility threshold for free school meals is very low.** Children in households with incomes above 130 percent of the federal poverty level do not qualify for free school meals. As a reference point, that would be an annual income over \$34,645 for a family of three, for example, a mother and two children during the 2025–2026 school year. Many families need free school meals for their children but do not qualify.
- **We don't know what is going on in homes.** Families that look “wealthy” from the outside may be struggling with medical debt, grief, mental health issues, stigma, or other problems that impact their ability to sign their children up for free meals or send money to school to purchase meals.
- **No child should go hungry at school.** Whatever the reason may be that parents do not send a packed lunch or money to school, children going hungry is not an acceptable outcome. They should be able to receive school meals to ensure they have the nutrition, energy and focus they need to get through the school day.
- **Many families are looking for relief from rising costs.** As the general cost of living and food prices increase, many families, across income brackets, are feeling squeezed and looking for ways to reduce their expenses.
- **Any stigma associated with school meals is reduced when all children have access to meals at no charge.** Many students, particularly in middle and high school, do not participate in school meals because of stigma even when they are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. They do not want to be perceived as low-income by their peers. That stigma only goes away when all students have access to school meals at no charge and cafeteria culture changes.

[illegible]

*“Offering free meals to all kids is too expensive.”*

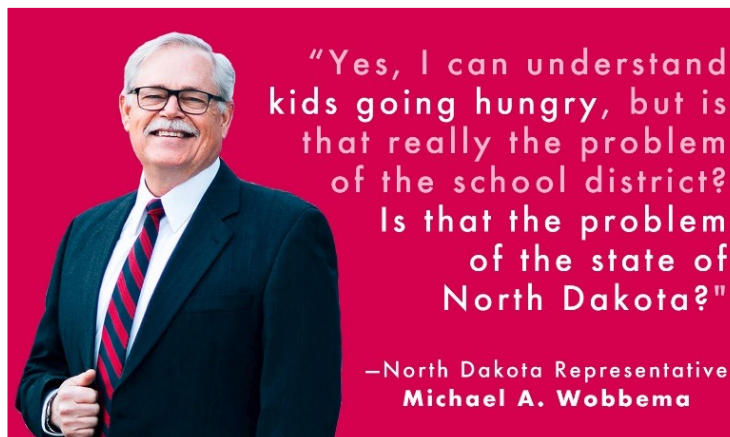
**RESPONSE:**

- **We need everyone in school ready to learn.** The best teachers, curriculum, technology and other educational investments go to waste if kids are too hungry to focus. Children who are hungry do not exist in a bubble in school. Research shows that children who experience hunger are more likely to have behavior problems that can hinder learning for them and their entire classroom. Everyone in school does better when all students are well-fed and ready to learn.

*“Children in need already receive free meals.”*

**RESPONSES:**

- **There are many children in need who are not eligible for free meals.** With the eligibility threshold for free school meals so low, many students who would benefit from a free breakfast and lunch at school go without. The eligibility threshold for free school meals is not tied to a livable wage and does not consider the varying cost of living in communities across the country. The current system of means-testing access to food during the school day is failing students.
- **We don’t means-test other parts of the school day.** Many families that send their children to public school have the means to purchase their own books, technology, tutors, and music lessons, but we do not ask them to send in money for textbooks, tablets, reading specialists, or music class. It’s time that we stop means-testing school meals, a critical part of the school day.



The North Dakota coalition held policymakers who spoke in opposition to the School Meals for All policy under consideration in the legislature accountable by sharing their statements via social media.

*“It only takes one hungry, dysregulated child who can’t focus to disrupt learning for the entire class.”*

—KINDERGARTEN TEACHER IN MN

**NOTES:**

**RESPONSE:**

- **Concern over food waste is not a reason to keep children hungry.** There may be items served in a school meal program that not all children want to eat, leading to plate waste, however, that is not a reason to deny children in need access to school meals.
- **It is important to expose children to new foods.** At home and at school, children often need to be introduced to food multiple times before they are willing to try it. Food not being eaten is not a reason to never offer that food to a child again. Being exposed to new foods, seeing their peers eat menu items they haven't tried before, and having the opportunity to eat the food when they are ready are all benefits of school meals.
- **There are strategies for reducing plate waste.** Increasing the amount of time that students have to eat, getting input from students on menu items they would like to eat, taste testing new foods with students, having recess before lunch, and many other practices can increase the amount of food that children eat at school and reduce plate waste. Check out FRAC's [Guide on Reducing Barriers to Consuming School Meals](#) for more ideas. When all children have access to school meals, school nutrition staff spend less time on administrative tasks and can spend more time preparing quality meals that are appealing to students.

[illegible]

# The First States to Pass Healthy School Meals for All

## California Case Study

### Overview

In July 2021, California passed legislation ensuring that all public school students in the state had access to school meals at no cost beginning in the 2022–2023 school year. [AB 130, the Education finance: education omnibus budget trailer bill](#) not only solidified the Universal School Meal Program but provided funding for school kitchen equipment upgrades, food service staff training, and the Farm to School Program.

### Campaign

[The School Meals for All Coalition](#) formed in early 2021 with the goal of increasing access to healthy school meals for all California students. A key coalition strength was strong representation across many sectors including education, health, agriculture, and the anti-hunger community. The coalition advocated for a suite of interrelated investments in school nutrition and farming to fight child hunger, improve meal quality, and strengthen the food system.

The campaign took place virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic and a few years after the passage of anti-lunch shaming legislation in the state. SB 250, The Child Hunger Prevention and Fair Treatment Act of 2017 was signed into law in October 2017 and prohibited lunch shaming students whose families had accrued school meal debt. In October 2019, [SB 265](#) was signed into law strengthening the earlier legislation and ensuring that all schoolchildren would be fed and treated the same regardless of unpaid school meal fees. This legislation, in combination with the free school meals provided by the federal government to all students across the U.S. in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, built significant momentum and support for School Meals for All legislation in California.

## California Case Study

## Maine Case Study

*“We provide our students free textbooks, access to computers, and other learning tools, so it only makes sense that we would provide free school meals as well. School Meals for All is a win-win for students, for schools, and for our economy.”*

**STATE SENATOR AND CHAIR  
OF THE SENATE BUDGET AND  
FISCAL REVIEW COMMITTEE  
NANCY SKINNER**

## Policy Champions

State Senator Nancy Skinner, the chair of the Senate Budget and Fiscal Review Committee, and her Chief of Staff Jessica Bartholow developed legislation that was eventually passed through the state's 2021–2022 budget. [SB 364](#), introduced by Sen. Skinner in 2021, included language to make school meals available to every public school student in California.

The School Meals for All Coalition, led by the California Association of Food Banks, Center for Ecoliteracy, TomKat Ranch, NextGen California, and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond, recruited the support of over 200 organizations and worked with school nutrition directors and cafeteria staff across the state to ensure those who would be implementing the legislation were on board. The coalition and its network advocated for the bill as it moved through the state legislature. Sign-on letters demonstrating support for the legislation were a significant advocacy tool throughout the campaign.

First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom supported the legislation, which was endorsed by the California Congressional delegation, and Governor Gavin Newsom signed it into law in the [2021–2022 California budget](#).

## Messaging

Strong messaging that built public and legislative support was essential to the School Meals for All campaign in California. The coalition amassed a significant amount of support including unanimous, bipartisan votes as SB 364 moved through the committee process. Demonstrating this support in combination with effective messaging played a significant role in getting School Meals for All legislation across the finish line.

### • Key messages included:

“Although California produces nearly half of our country’s fruits and vegetables, our kids are going hungry at alarming rates.”

“Aside from the immediate need to reduce child hunger, a body of evidence shows that receiving proper nutrition benefits child development, behavior, ability to learn, and the creation of lifelong healthy habits.”

“These investments will reduce child hunger, improve the school academic environment, help families with low-incomes, and provide economic and social benefits that support California farmers.”

## Funding

The 2021–2022 budget included \$650 million and an ongoing commitment to fund the program. The budget also included \$150 million in one-time funding for kitchen infrastructure upgrades and food service staff training, which supported implementation of Healthy School Meals for All and increased the production of freshly prepared meals. For the Farm to School Program, \$30 million was included for both 2021 and 2022, which funded sustainable food procurement and nutrition and food system education. California’s [2022–2023 budget](#) included significant additional funding to support and expand these programs.

### NOTES:



## Outcome

The 130th Maine State Legislature passed a Supplemental Budget that included a new partially funded Meals for Students Fund and seeded the fund with \$10 million. The legislation passed with strong bipartisan support. The School Meals for All policy was fully funded the following year and has been fully funded in every budget since. The new law directed the Maine Department of Education to work with school districts to maximize federal reimbursements by participating in all federally funded programs and provisions like the Community Eligibility Provision and Provision 2 to reduce the financial burden on the state. The reduced administrative burden of school meals that came with free school meals for all has allowed many schools to redirect their capacity to providing meals that meet the cultural and dietary needs of their students, and to running the federal Afterschool Supper and Summer Nutrition Programs to help ensure that their students are not hungry after school or during the summer.

*“Feeding all Maine kids in our schools will make the most of our tax dollars.”*

– SENATOR MATT POULIOT

## NOTES:



# Passage and Implementation

## Bill Signing

After your Healthy School Meals for All policy passes through the legislature, it will likely be signed into law by the governor and it is important to celebrate the creation of Healthy School Meals for All policy with your elected officials and champions.

A bill-signing ceremony to highlight your governor signing the state's Healthy School Meals for All policy into law is a great opportunity to mark the occasion, publicize the policy, and thank everyone who played a role in the successful campaign.

**Here are some considerations for your bill signing ceremony:**

- **Location.** A school cafeteria is the perfect backdrop for a celebration of legislation that will allow all students to have access to nutritious school meals at no charge.
- **Guest list.** This is the perfect opportunity to invite everyone who played a role in getting the legislation passed. This could include legislative champions, coalition members, student advocates, and campaign funders.
- **Speakers.** Short remarks from the governor, legislative champions, a coalition representative, and a student advocate allows you to mark the occasion. Be sure to provide quotes for the media in attendance.
- **Media.** Inviting your local print, radio, and TV media to the ceremony is a great way to publicize your new state policy. Have one or several coalition members prepared to speak to the media about the impact that the legislation will have on children, families, and schools. Consider livestreaming the event.



Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz signed Hunger Free Schools bill into law at bill-signing ceremony.

## Bill Signing

## Policy Implementation

## From Piloting an Idea to Making It Mainstream

- After the bill signing, your coalition may want to get together for another celebration event to highlight milestones in the campaign, distribute remaining swag items, and recognize coalition members for their specific contributions. Passing a Healthy School Meals for All policy is a big victory. Take the time to celebrate it before moving on to the next challenge.



**New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham signed Healthy Hunger-Free Students bill into law.**

[illegible]

## Policy Implementation

Now that your policy has passed, there is more work to do to ensure that the policy is implemented effectively. There may also be opportunities for additional legislation or to encourage best practices at the school or district level to strengthen school meals programs.

- **Make sure students have enough time to eat.** Healthy School Meals for All policies lead to greater participation in school meals, which can make cafeteria lines longer. Students need enough time to eat their food once they have made it through the cafeteria line. Furthermore, providing students with enough time to eat is an effective strategy in minimizing plate waste. There are currently no national requirements for the length of lunch, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [recommends](#) schools give students at least 20 minutes to eat lunch once they are seated. States should consider requiring that students have 20–30 minutes of seat time to consume their meals. Connecticut [passed legislation](#) to ensure that students have 20 minutes to eat their lunch in response to complaints from students that there wasn't enough time to eat.

- **Communicate to families the importance of collecting household income information.**

Even after a Healthy School Meals for All policy passes, many schools need to continue to collect school meal applications annually, unless they use the Community Eligibility Provision or Provision 2. Household income information is important because it determines the amount of federal reimbursement the school will receive for the meals they serve. Schools receive a higher federal reimbursement rate for meals served to students eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, and maximizing federal reimbursement will help decrease the cost of the state's Healthy School Meals for All policy.

### NOTES:

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## Application for Educational Benefits



While all in-person students will receive one free breakfast and lunch\* under Minnesota's Free School Meals program, it remains **critical that all families complete an Application for Educational Benefits each school year**. By doing so, you not only support your child's school with vital funding for educational programs and supports but also open up opportunities for additional benefits. Eligible families can qualify for various benefits, including:

### In-School Benefits



School Funding



Technology Funding



Field Trips



Athletics



ACT/SAT Testing Fees

### Out-of-School Benefits



Select Internet, Phone & Energy Providers



Public Transportation



SUN Bucks  
(formerly called Summer EBT Benefits)



50% off Amazon Prime Membership



Museums, Theaters & Zoos

A school district in Minnesota revised their school meal application to be an Application for Educational Benefits once the state's Healthy School Meals for All policy passed. It clearly conveys to families how sharing their household income can support funding for their child's school and also connect them with other benefits for their household if they are eligible.

- **Create a statewide school meal application form.** A state-level form ensures consistency across all school districts. It reduces confusion for families who move between districts or have children in different districts and makes it easier to conduct broad outreach to encourage families to fill out their application and for the state child nutrition agency to translate the form into multiple languages, ensuring it is accessible to all families.
- **Conduct focus groups with students to understand the remaining barriers.** Once school meals are offered at no charge, there may be other challenges that prevent students from participating. For example, students may need menu items that are halal, kosher, or vegetarian. Or there may be room for improvement in menu item quality, appeal, and variety. Talk to students to learn more about who still isn't participating in school meals and why.
- **Schedule recess before lunch.** In some schools, students leave the cafeteria for recess when they are done eating. That can result in children eating quickly or not eating parts of their lunch to ensure they get as much recess time as possible. Recess before lunch or having students remain in the cafeteria for the duration of their lunch period can encourage students to eat slower and have time to eat all of the components of their meal.
- **Focus on breakfast participation.** While offering meals at no charge to all students increases participation in school meals, a significant gap between breakfast and lunch participation continues to exist in Healthy School Meals for All states. Implementing breakfast in the classroom, grab and go kiosks, meal vending machines, and second chance breakfast can help to close the gap between breakfast and lunch participation.

**NOTES:**


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## From Piloting an Idea to Making It Mainstream

While there have been calls for free school meals for all since the 1940s, it took the nationwide waivers during the COVID-19 pandemic to finally pilot a nationwide Healthy School Meals for All policy.

Building on that experience, nine states over the course of five years passed state policies to offer school meals to all students at no charge and many more introduced legislation. With every state that passes a Healthy School Meals for All policy, momentum builds, and we get closer to a national tipping point.

Your Healthy School Meals for All campaign will add to the momentum and show public support for offering school meals to all students at no charge. When your policy passes, your state will expand critical access to free meals to more students and help build the evidence base and best practices for increasing school meal participation.

Utilize the lessons and information in this guide from other states and add your own to the growing bank of [resources](#) we have for passing Healthy School Meals for All policies across the country.

## NOTES:



May 21, 2024, [article](#) in *The New York Times*



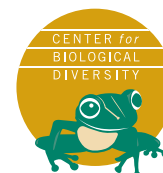
To stay connected to the latest news about Healthy School Meals for All,  
visit [www.FreeSchoolMealsforAll.org](http://www.FreeSchoolMealsforAll.org)

# National Advocacy for Healthy School Meals for All

FRAC is proud to convene the [National Healthy School Meals for All Coalition](#), a diverse group of national anti-hunger, education, health, school nutrition, and child advocacy organizations dedicated to building support for and passing nationwide free Healthy School Meals for All legislation. Read the [Coalition Statement of Support](#).

## HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL COALITION

The time for nationwide Healthy School Meals for All is now.





**Food Research & Action Center**

Washington, DC 20036  
202.986.2200 | [www.frac.org](http://www.frac.org)



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