

# Nourishing Success: Food Security for Every Student



**Far too many children go to bed every night not knowing where their next meal may come from. According to the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#), 14.1 million children live in food-insecure households where insufficient access to nutritious food threatens their health, development, and academic success.**

## Hunger Hiding in Your Classroom

Food insecurity is a symptom of poverty for which there are many [root causes](#). It is driven by real-world challenges that households face every day: low wages, rising costs for food and other basic essentials, expensive housing and childcare, lack of healthcare, and systemic discrimination. [Food insecurity exists in communities across the country](#) **but it** disproportionately affects single-parent households, Black and Latinx households, and households in urban and rural areas, and the Southern region of the U.S. Likewise, food insecurity affects the whole household, although not all members equally. [Older siblings](#) may forgo their own meals to help feed younger children, deepening the hardships teens already experience during adolescence. Similarly, parents will often sacrifice their own nutrition to provide for their children, meaning that if a child is showing signs of hunger, the entire household is likely experiencing food insecurity as well.

Hunger is a physiological condition resulting from food insecurity that is not always obvious, and with [1 in 7 children living in poverty](#) in the U.S., many teachers have hunger hiding in their classrooms. Some [common signs of food insecurity](#) may include:

- Constant preoccupation with food or anxiety around food;
- Hoarding food when possible;
- Difficulty concentrating and/or paying attention;

- Poor memory;
- Hyperactivity or impulsiveness;
- Aggressive or antisocial behaviors, including bullying;
- Irritability, anxiety and worry;
- Frequent illnesses;
- Low energy;
- Rapid changes in weight—loss or gain—without changes in activity; and
- Slow or stunted growth.

It is well understood that children cannot learn on an empty stomach, but the far-reaching impacts of food insecurity are more than a growling tummy. [Food insecurity](#) negatively affects children's health and academic achievement, impacting students' social, emotional, and behavioral development, and interfering with student learning.

[In a national survey with the AFT](#), educators said that evidence of food insecurity was among the top reasons for reports to child protective services. Hunger is serious and a common concern, yet it is rarely considered a sign of neglect. Likewise, [child protective services often decline educators' referrals](#). Thankfully, there are many opportunities for caring educators and thoughtful schools to promote well-being and directly address hunger. This brief discusses evidence-based policy and program approaches.

*Erin Hysom is a Senior Child Nutrition Policy Analyst for FRAC, which 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.*

*Chelsea Prax directs children's health and well-being programs for the AFT, a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities.*

## Close the Gap: Connect Students to Federal Nutrition Programs

Educators are trusted figures for students and families and can play a key role in identifying students who may need additional support in accessing food and connecting them to available resources at school and in their community.

Federal nutrition programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program ([SNAP](#)), the [School Meals Programs](#), the [Afterschool Nutrition Programs](#), and the [Summer Nutrition Programs](#) reduce childhood food insecurity and help families stretch food budgets at home.

### Help Families Apply for SNAP

As the largest federal nutrition program, SNAP serves as the first line of defense against hunger, providing grocery benefits to nearly 40 million people annually. Without SNAP, hunger in America would be dramatically greater.

SNAP participants receive monthly benefits on an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card—which works like a debit card—to purchase food at grocery stores, corner stores, farmers' markets and other participating food retailers. Further, children receiving SNAP are automatically eligible for free school meals without having to submit a school meal application. Linking SNAP participation to free school meals helps ensure children have access to food at home and during the school day.

Educators can work with colleagues, such as school counselors and school social workers, to provide information about SNAP eligibility and benefits and help families complete the application. School staff can also make sure that families receive application materials in their preferred language and help navigate systems that might otherwise be confusing or overwhelming. More than anything, staff can help normalize the process of applying and reassure parents that SNAP is a vital support, not a sign of failure.

Additionally, many state and local agencies, such as the department of human services, local social service agencies, food banks, universities, and nonprofit organizations, work to connect eligible individuals to food assistance programs. Schools should consider partnering with these organizations to conduct SNAP outreach during back-to-school nights, school-sponsored meetings and events, or through school communication channels, such as newsletters or social media.

## Support School Meals

The [National School Lunch Program](#) and [School Breakfast Program](#) make it possible for children to receive nutritious meals every school day. The [benefits of school meals](#) cannot be overstated. [Research](#) shows that school lunch is the healthiest food source for American schoolchildren. Likewise, strong school breakfast programs have been linked to improvements in students' attendance, behavior, [health](#), and [academics](#). However, stigma, cost, perception, and logistics prevent far too many children from participating in these vital nutrition programs.

"For many of Minnesota's children, basic needs—like food—present a significant barrier they must overcome. With **1 in 6 children across our state facing food insecurity**, the impact is widely felt. As a public school educator, these are not just numbers to me. I have seen children given alternative meals due to an unpaid balance, or skip the lunch line entirely to avoid the embarrassment of that conversation in front of their peers. I've also watched children go hungry simply because they forgot their home lunch and lacked the money for a school meal.

The implementation of the Free School Meal program in recent years has been truly transformative, and its impact on my classroom is what I am most thankful for. Seeing children from all backgrounds and family situations eat a nutritious meal together helps build connections and fosters a stronger sense of belonging. That is why I'm calling on us to ensure this experience remains something every child continues to have. **When their basic needs are met, their curiosity is ignited**, their creativity is unleashed, and they are truly ready to thrive. As outside efforts begin to influence our work, it is **more critical than ever to preserve the vital support our children and families receive from the Free School Meal program.**"

—John Horton, teacher, Saint Paul (Minnesota)



## Help Families Fill Out School Meal Applications

The traditional school meals model charges students for meals served based on their eligibility for free, reduced-price, or paid meals. A student's meal eligibility is based on their household income. Students from low-income households may qualify for free or reduced-price school meals if their household is eligible via a school meals application, if their household uses SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, and in most states Medicaid, or if the student is experiencing homelessness or is a foster child, a migrant student, or a runaway. School officials, such as teachers, counselors and administrators, should regularly review enrollment rosters to ensure that all children who are automatically [eligible for free school meals](#) are being offered them.

Ensuring eligible children receive school meal benefits helps to reduce hunger during the school day. If you suspect a student may benefit from free or reduced-price school meals, request that a school counselor or social worker helps the family submit a school meals application. Make sure the application is in the family's primary language.

School administrators can also certify students for free meals if, after applications have been distributed, a family known to be eligible did not apply. This option is intended for limited use in specific situations. School administrators should contact the school district's child nutrition department for more information on this option.

## Support a Strong School Meals Program at Your School

Principals, teachers, nutrition staff and other school stakeholders can work together to create school breakfast and lunch programs that follow best practices and help students get the most out of the meals.

- **Implement Breakfast After the Bell.** Despite its undeniable benefits, school breakfast participation lags behind school lunch. One of the biggest barriers to school breakfast participation is timing. In a traditional model, school breakfast is served early, before the start of the school day. This creates a multitude of obstacles that prevent students from participating in the breakfast program. Flipping from a traditional breakfast model to a [Breakfast After the Bell model](#) where children can eat breakfast in their classroom during morning announcements or first period dismantles many breakfast barriers and increases students' access to this essential morning meal. Teachers are some of the best advocates for successful Breakfast After the Bell programs; work
- **Utilize share tables.** Sometimes, students have extra food they don't intend to consume during the breakfast or lunch period. "[Share tables](#)" are a great way to give that food to another student, helping to fight hunger while also reducing food waste. Talk to your school food service department and make sure they offer a "share table" anywhere children consume meals.
- **Eat school meals.** School meals aren't just for students. Principals, teachers, coaches, support staff, and other adults are also able to purchase breakfast and lunch from the school cafeteria. Participate in in-classroom breakfast programs, go through the cafeteria line with students, eat with them in the cafeteria, and model healthy eating by participating in the school meals programs.
- **Promote the importance of school meals.** The school meals programs represent a long-standing national public health investment shaped by extensive federal regulation and research. The programs are ripe for educational opportunities, and can be integrated into lessons on history, civics, mathematics, science, English, health, business, culinary classes, and more. Incorporate the school meals programs into classroom lessons, school publications, and communication channels. Challenge misperceptions by reminding students of the nutritional quality of school meals and the benefits of participating, or explore special topics such as farm-to-school programs. You may even consider touring the school kitchen or inviting school nutrition professionals to speak with your students.



Check out "[The Breakfast Blueprint](#)," a comprehensive guide for planning, implementing, and evaluating Breakfast After the Bell Programs developed with AFT educators and FRAC.

with your union, administration, school nutrition staff, custodial team, and education colleagues to implement Breakfast After the Bell models and allow students the time and space to consume breakfast in their classroom.

- **Form a school health council.** School health and wellness councils are fantastic opportunities to engage students in food and nutrition. Form or join a student-led school health council where you can talk to students about school meals, barriers to participating, and goals for the program. Work collaboratively with students and school nutrition services to develop a realistic, student-driven meal program.

When families do not qualify for free meals and are unable to cover the cost of school meals, debt can accumulate. Unpaid school meal debt has led some schools to report families to child protective services for their failure to pay or institute policies that shame students for carrying debt. These practices are not an effective way to collect payment and are not in the best interest of the child or family. If your school treats unpaid school meal debt this way, talk to your school nutrition services, principal, school social worker, and other stakeholders about changing this policy. Read this [FRAC resource](#) to identify best practices for handling meal debt.

## Advocate for Free School Meals for All Students

Offering all children school meals at no charge is the key to a hunger-free school. Like transportation and textbooks, free school meals are a necessary component of a successful school day. As of the 2026–2027 school year, nine states (California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York and Vermont) have passed [Healthy School Meals for All](#)

[policies](#), ensuring all students have access to free school meals regardless of household income or circumstance. Five states (Arkansas, Connecticut, Delaware, Pennsylvania and South Carolina) and the District of Columbia offer free school breakfast to all students. Additionally, over 55,000 high-poverty schools used the [Community Eligibility Provision](#) to offer free meals to all students in the 2025-26 school year.

- As trusted messengers within communities, educators play a pivotal role in child nutrition advocacy. School staff can add their support and unique perspectives to the growing momentum behind [Healthy School Meals for All](#). Connect with anti-hunger organizations and school nutrition professionals in your state to discover how advocates are introducing legislation that will increase children’s access to healthy school meals.
- If your state has yet to pass a Healthy School Meals for All policy, join advocacy efforts to pass such a policy. FRAC’s [“Healthy School Meals for All State Advocacy Guide”](#) can show you how to get started.

## Offer Afterschool Snacks and Suppers

The [Afterschool Nutrition Programs](#) allow eligible locations to offer snacks or suppers to children during afterschool hours. Offering meals in conjunction with afterschool enrichment or education programming helps support the whole child, and further combats childhood hunger and food insecurity. Connect with your school nutrition department to see if your school is eligible to serve afterschool snacks and suppers.

## Providing free meals to all students has made a big difference for kids and school staff alike.

**“Eating for free means more students get a good breakfast and lunch every day.** In Salem, our elementary students also get a prepared snack midway through the morning. It might be fruit or cut-up fresh vegetables. This helps them focus better on their schoolwork and cuts down on visits to the nurse because their stomach hurts (because they were hungry). We also provide dinner at the high school level for our students who have late practices or rehearsals and don’t have the means to get home and then back to school. The stigma for students and families alike around free lunch applications no longer exists.

Further, teachers and school workers no longer have to worry about tracking down unpaid lunch money or dealing with complicated paperwork. Overall, thanks to universal school meals in our state, teachers find that students come to class much **more ready to learn, allowing everyone to focus on teaching rather than hunger.”**

—Ann Berman, president, Salem (Massachusetts) Teachers Union



## Summer meals make schools a community hub whether or not class is in session.

"I work in food service. I cook the food and I serve the kids their lunch. They like [menu items] such as an asada bowl with chicken, rice and beans. We added posole to our menu; they like that. They like things that they've seen at home. We have a salad bar; we encourage them to get more fruits and vegetables. We have fresh fruit for them; they like tangerines, peaches, grapes, bananas and oranges.

I see that if they don't eat, they get sluggish. I get kids who say they don't feel well, and the nurse sends them to eat food. Eating a meal or snack at the school helps them feel better; sometimes, they're just hungry.

I also work at a Smart & Final [grocery store], and I see that **parents are having trouble with their groceries**. They complain; I hear it all the time, 'I have to buy so many more groceries in the summer.' I tell them that we have **free meals at school through the summer**, and they get excited. It can **help take a little bit of a burden off**.

During the summer, the school offers free meals for the community—breakfast and lunch for children up to age 18. We get some community participants, such as kids who are not quite in school yet but are almost ready. They like to see what it's like to eat in the school cafeteria."

—Dawn Gallo, food service assistant, Lawndale, California



### Promote the Summer Meals Programs

Childhood hunger rates increase during the summer when students no longer have access to school breakfast and lunch. The [Summer Nutrition Programs](#) help fill that hunger gap by offering meals to children when school is not in session. Connect with your school nutrition department to determine where summer meal sites are being offered in your community, and work with school counselors, school nutrition services, and school administrators to promote these summer locations to students and their families.

### Conduct Summer EBT Outreach and Advocacy

The [Summer EBT Program](#) helps families with low incomes buy groceries during the summer. It provides families with approximately \$40 a month per eligible child to help with food costs. Children are eligible for Summer EBT benefits if they qualify for free or reduced-price meals during the school year. Visit [frac.org/summer-ebt](https://frac.org/summer-ebt) to see if your state participates in Summer EBT. If so, make sure to include Summer EBT information in end-of-year resources and communications to families. If your state does not participate in Summer EBT yet, connect with a state anti-hunger organization to learn how you can encourage your state to adopt this vital child nutrition program.

### Additional Nutrition Services

Increasing children's access to federal nutrition programs is the best way to combat childhood food insecurity. Federal nutrition programs are efficient, effective and sustainable, and are central to our nation's efforts to combat hunger. However, many schools and communities offer additional nutrition support to help cover the needs of children and families.

#### Charitable Food Programs

Many communities have programs that provide food to children and teens outside of school. Ask your school counselor or social worker to provide families with information about local food pantries and other community food programs.

#### Backpack Programs

School backpack programs provide food and groceries to students over weekends and school breaks. These programs are often a collaboration between local food banks, school counselors and Parent Teacher Associations (PTA). If your school does not have a backpack program, reach out to your school administrators, counselors and PTA to initiate a program. If you already have a backpack program, promote it to your students and their families.

---

**Students need to be hunger-free to get the most out of their school day. Helping students connect to the federal nutrition programs and community food supports is a great and proven way to support their nutrition, health and learning.**

---