

The Need for Universal School Meals in North Carolina

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nearly 400,000 North Carolina children struggle with reliable access to nutritious food. Schools are the primary nutrition source for all children, however current efforts to increase school meal accessibility fall short of meeting student needs. Other states have begun leveraging free school breakfast and lunch programs to address child food insecurity. North Carolina should be a catalyst in prioritizing child well-being by enacting universal school meals in order to ensure proper school meal accessibility.



BACKGROUND

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) established food and nutrition security as a key social determinant of health for individual well-being.¹ Food insecurity impacts children's health, behavior, and educational outcomes.^{2,3} In 2020, North Carolina's child food insecurity rate was 17.1% compared to national household average of 14.8%.^{4,5} Food insecurity disproportionately impacts families of color and single-parent households.⁵

School meals have been identified as the main source of nutrition for all children, regardless of income, indicating an opportunity to address food insecurity.⁶

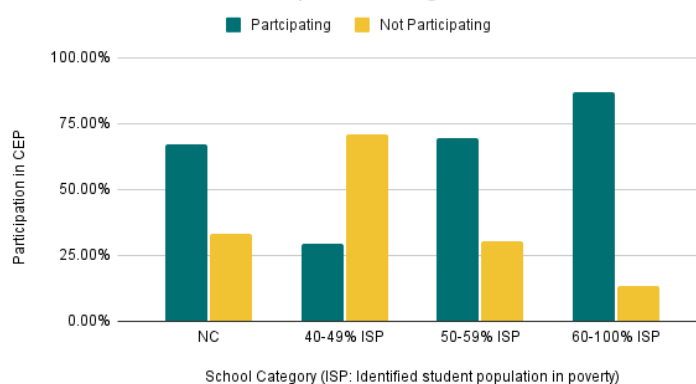
The provision of universal school meals increases children's diet quality and food security, attendance, and academic performance.⁷

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) accounts for roughly a 3.8% reduction in food insecurity among school aged children.⁸ In 2019, 74.1% of students were eligible for free or reduced school lunches.⁹ The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) provides universal breakfast and lunch to students if 40% or more of the identified student population (ISP) meets poverty thresholds.⁸



Despite the success of CEP within participating schools, 1 out of 3 eligible schools were not participating in the 2021-2022 school year and an additional 445 schools were near eligible (30-39% of students met poverty thresholds).^{9,10} As demonstrated in the graph below, the CEP fails in its recruitment of and sustainability among schools, indicating the need for a more comprehensive solution.¹⁰

North Carolina CEP Participation of Eligible Schools



Following the repeal of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) school lunch waivers, **NC school lunch debt has increased from \$1.3 million to \$3.1 million, reflecting the unmet need of students under existing NSLP standards.**^{11,12} As legislators introduce bills for universally free school meals in their states, others have sought temporary reauthorizations or waiver extensions since the COVID-19 pandemic when school meals were free for all students.¹³

POLICY SOLUTIONS

Implementing a nationwide universal school meals program or a universal school meals program in the state of North Carolina would yield several positive outcomes for youth and their families. **Beneficial outcomes may include the reduction of child food insecurity, elimination of complicated application processes, and elimination of stigma for students associated with being a free or reduced lunch recipient.**^{7,14,15}

Although a post-pandemic universal school meals program is newly implemented in California, parents are already recognizing household financial benefits.¹⁶ Several states have introduced universal school meals legislation to address child food security. For example, Minnesota passed HF 5, which provides free school breakfast and lunch for students by appropriating state funds to the Department of Education.¹⁷ New York is taking a similar approach by introducing a bill that would provide reimbursements for free breakfast and lunch to students regardless of income.¹⁸ Colorado seeks to achieve similar outcomes by enacting tax deduction caps on residents earning \$300,000 or more annually, which would fund universally free school meals for public school students.¹⁹

At the federal level, bills to enact universal school meals in all states have been introduced to Congress without success. Senator Bernie Sanders introduced the Universal School Meals Program Act of 2021, which would have provided school meals to children in schools with no cost or income considerations.¹⁸ Child nutrition initiatives, including free school meals, were initially proposed in the Biden Administration's Build Back Better Act; however, these provisions were withdrawn from the version that was passed.^{13,20}

CALL TO ACTION

Given that over 17% of North Carolina's children are food insecure, measures must be taken to ensure that every child in our state has access to healthy, nutritious meals. Food insecurity among children is especially detrimental, as a lack of access to healthy food is associated with serious negative impacts on child health and development. North Carolina schools have the opportunity to directly improve their students' health, educational, and behavioral outcomes by providing

school meals to all students. As North Carolina citizens, we urge our legislators to **introduce and pass a policy akin to Minnesota's HF 5, which will provide breakfast and lunch to all students, regardless of income.** Public officials should prioritize child health and ensure that all students are equipped with the basic necessities to thrive in and outside of the classroom.

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