

# Keeping the Next Generation Fed:

## A Policy Brief on the Universal School Meals Program Act of 2021



### INTRODUCTION

The Universal School Meals Program Act of 2021 would be beneficial to children, families, and local farmers across the country. The act calls for a reform of the meal system in public schools. It would make school meals free in all states, expand summer meal programs and encourage school districts to use local ingredients in their meals.

Per the USDA, food insecurity can be defined as “...a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.” The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a rise in food insecurity in the United States, despite the increase in programs to combat it. These programs are slowly fading away, making the passing of the Universal School Meals Program Act of 2021 imperative.

### FOOD SECURITY AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Food insecure children face several disadvantages compared to their food secure peers. According to Shankal et al., food insecurity is a developmental risk. In school aged children, they found an association between food insecurity and behavior and mental health symptoms. Children experiencing food insecurity are more likely to have impaired academic performance, inattention, increased hyperactivity, attendance issues, aggressive behavior and be less adaptive.

### Food Insecurity Among Children Returned to a Historic Low

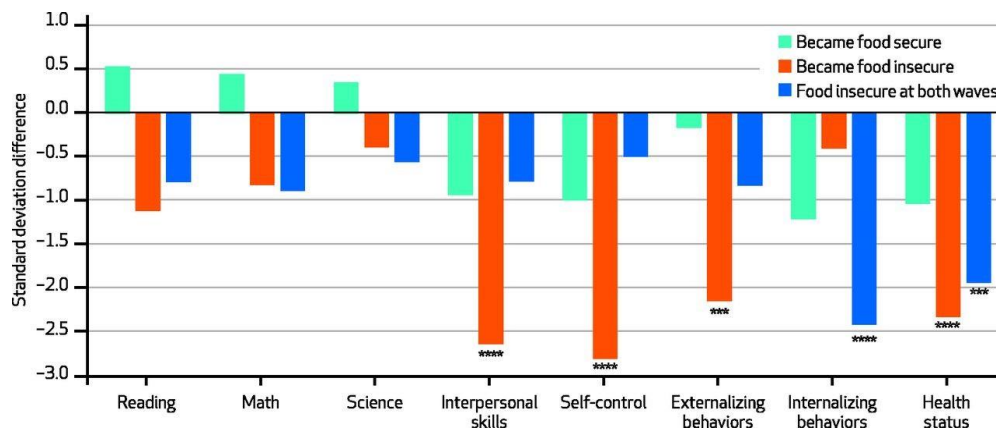
Share of households with children that lacked access to adequate food at some point in the year



Note: Households with a food-insecure child (light blue line) are a subset of households with children where any member was food insecure (dark blue line). Research suggests adults may try to shield children from the effects of food insecurity. Children in food-insecure households may not always experience food insecurity.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement 2001–2021

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Graph depicting student food insecurity differences and outcomes from kindergarten to first grade

Source: Kimbro and Denney

Not only does food insecurity affect a student's ability to learn, but it is also a reason some kids do not show up to school at all. A study conducted by Tamiru and Belachew found that students who are food secure are 57% less likely to be absent from school. Food insecure children are more likely to have physical and mental illness than their food secure peers, leading to absenteeism. Being absent directly affects academic performance and further distances children from their fellow students.

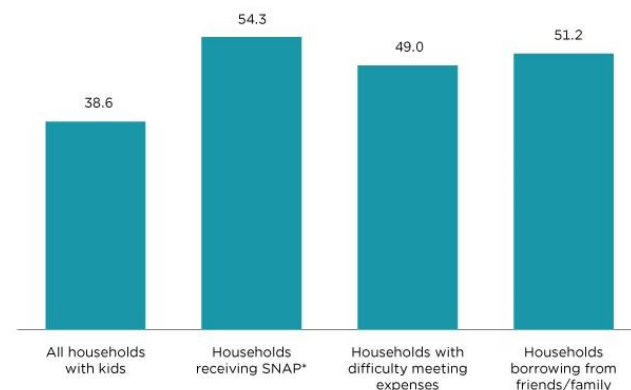
The entire student body receiving free meals removes the stigma associated with free meals and poorness. The act would remove debts from students' accounts as well, eliminating the humiliation of having lunch debt and not being able to eat. The bill would also rid of scenarios where kids or parents forget lunch money. The ability to go to school without worrying about food insecurity and the stigma surrounding it would greatly improve educational outcomes.

### STUDENTS WHO FALL THROUGH THE CRACKS

Many children and their families do not know that they qualify for free or reduced lunch.

According to Project Bread, an estimated 27% of food insecure children are not eligible for free or reduced school meals. This could be due to unexpected crises, parental neglect, or increases in the cost of living. Food security is nuanced, and income is not the only barrier to food access.

Households With School-Enrolled Kids Receiving Free School Meals (In percent)



\* Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.  
Note: Figures for December 1-13, 2021.  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey.

Graph showing families financial struggles versus free school meal enrollment

Source: U.S Census Bureau

A report by Gundersen and Ziliak states that income is not the only driver of childhood food insecurity. A theme across various studies is that adult caregivers' physical and mental health are central to their children's food security. As discussed in Shankal et al., maternal distress can be a cause of food insecurity. Parents in a state of distress may be too overworked to fill out an application or may think it reflects poorly on them as a parent. Children in these households could greatly benefit from universal meal programs.

### **FOOD INSECURITY IN THE SUMMER**

The bill addresses summer food insecurity among students as well. It advocates for summer EBT for all low-income students, along with allowing all districts to offer summer meals. Low-income families are often unaware of these summer programs, or unable to travel to summer meal sites. Throughout the school year, some children only receive nutritious meals while at school. With this knowledge, school meal programs need to be year-round.

There have been efforts to make summer EBT widespread. According to the Food Action and Resource Center, the program is spreading to more states, but in doing so the funding is becoming more spread out. For the program to provide each family with sufficient funds, it would have to be expanded.

### **PROCURING LOCAL FOODS**

Furthermore, the bill proposes that the government would provide a thirty-cent reimbursement to schools that procure local (within 150 miles) foods. This action would stimulate the local economy and create a more sustainable food system.



Students and staff sorting locally sourced foods

Source: Green Schools National Network

According to the Institute of Child Nutrition, procuring local foods increases nutrition in children's meals and encourages them to make healthy choices.

For example, local food expenses in a Hawaiian school district went from 20% to 53% in one semester. Green Schools National Network reported that this led to waste reductions, monetary savings and an increase in students eating meals. Procuring local foods can have great outcomes for the community, students, and business owners.

Local small businesses that partner schools would also be seen as more trustworthy, greatly benefiting their income. The Lunch Box states that food companies can have

a positive impact on other foods that they produce. The practice would also strengthen school's bonds with their community.

### **SUCCESS AT DIFFERENT LEVELS**

It is important that children across the nation have equal access to nutritional food in and out of school. Universal free meal programs have successfully been enacted at the local and state level, along with temporarily at the national level.

Prior to the pandemic, a study conducted by Leos-Ubel et al. in New York City shows that access to universal free breakfast increased use of the program. Students with the lowest household incomes and qualified for free meals had an increased participation of 5%, while those who qualified for reduced meals showed an increase in participation by 21%. Students paying full price had an increase in participation by 36%. Many students are food insecure yet unaware of the resources available. For these students, a universal meal program would allow them to easily receive the benefits that they need.

During the pandemic, the Seamless Summer Options waiver by the USDA was utilized by 90% of school districts. The waiver allowed schools to serve all student free meals. In June 2022 the program expired, despite COVID-19 continuing to impact families across the country.

Due to the continuation of economic stressors, Massachusetts extended universal free meals for students for the 2022-2023 school year. According to Project Bread, in March 2022 lunch participation was 42.3% higher than it was prior to the pandemic. Many families have come to rely on free lunches through the pandemic and taking the program away may lead to less food insecure students utilizing free meals than before.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Universal School Meals Program Act, if passed, would be extremely beneficial to families, students, and communities across the nation. Children cannot learn while hungry, or without proper nutrition. Various disparities in education come about because of disparities in home life and income. It is impossible to reach every hungry child through an application based on income, therefore it is best that school meals become universal.

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