

# More than 280,000 Ohio kids would be impacted by proposed national school meal program cuts

BY: [SUSAN TEBBEN](#) - JANUARY 28, 2025 5:00 AM



Students getting their lunch at a primary school. (Photo by Amanda Mills/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.)

As the federal government looks at ways to cut costs and fund Trump-administration measures, a congressional committee is considering a cut that could take billions from school breakfast and lunch programs.

That cut could impact more than 280,000 students in Ohio alone, and 728 schools in the state, according to data from the Food Research & Action Center.

FRAC identified this loss from a proposal being discussed by the Republican-led [U.S. House Ways and Means Committee](#) – membership of which includes Ohio Reps. [Mike Carey](#) and [Max Miller](#) – as part of upcoming budget reconciliation in the Capitol. The proposal would chop \$3 billion from school breakfast and lunch programs.

“Taking away this important and effective way for local schools to offer breakfast and lunch at no charge to all their students would increase hunger in the classroom, reintroduce unnecessary paperwork for families and schools, increase school meal debt and bring stigma back into the cafeteria,” according to FRAC senior child nutrition policy analyst Erin Hysom and interim child nutrition programs and policy director Alexis Bylander.

The proposal would directly impact schools that don’t fall under the [Community Eligibility Provision](#), a service based out of the federal National School Lunch Program, that serves districts in high poverty areas, allowing them to distribute meals at no cost to the students.

Schools are deemed eligible for CEP based on their participation with other programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

According to a summary of the proposal among a list of possible budget reconciliation plans [obtained by Politico](#), the CEP eligibility would be raised from the previous level of schools with 40% participation in the other federal programs to 60%.

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Hysom and Bylander say the new proposal would reduce eligibility for CEP, making more than 24,000 schools nationwide and 12 million children no longer eligible, including the more than 280,000 Ohio children impacted.

The advocacy group Children's Defense Fund-Ohio said the loss from this proposal would impact more Ohio children "than there are residents in the city of Toledo, Ohio's fourth-largest city."

"As I've said before, free meals can help our students thrive mentally, socially and physically, especially those whose parents are currently trying to do all they can to support their children while juggling their responsibilities at work and fighting inflationary costs at home," Dr. John Stanford, state director of CDF-Ohio, told the Capital Journal.

Stanford also pointed to public opinion and a 2024 Republican research firm poll that showed [a majority of Ohioans](#) support universal free school breakfast and lunch programs for public schools.

"So why would our lawmakers on Capitol Hill look to pass federal legislation that goes against the wishes of all Ohioans and effectively reduces access to free meals for students by increasing bureaucratic paperwork for school administrators," Stanford asked.

A 2023 report from the CDF-Ohio showed 1 in 6 children live in a household that experiences hunger and more than 1 in 3 children who live in households with food insecurity already don't qualify for school meals.

Both Stanford and FRAC said the changes proposed by the Ways and Means Committee would create further opportunities for students to "fall through the cracks" by requiring proof of income to apply for free and reduced meals. The meal programs had already seen decreases in participation, due to the [lapsing of COVID-19 pandemic waivers](#) of school meals costs.

Ohio saw a 14% drop in average lunch participation due to the loss of the waivers.

"We need our lawmakers to be completely focused on helping children and not creating unnecessary bureaucratic red tape for an evidence-based, best practices program that's working," Stanford added. "This proposal would achieve the opposite."

The state [used its own budget in 2023](#) to make meals free for those who qualified for reduced-price meals, along with those who qualified for no-cost meals, but didn't go the distance on universal school meals. The state is set to pass another operating budget this year that could include the discussion again, with a new House Speaker and Senate President at the helm.

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SUSAN TEBBEN

Susan Tebben is an award-winning journalist with a decade of experience covering Ohio news, including courts and crime, Appalachian social issues, government, education, diversity and culture. She has worked for The Newark Advocate, The Glasgow (KY) Daily Times, The Athens Messenger, and WOUB Public Media. She has also had work featured on National Public Radio.

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