



Universal Free School Meals for DC Students

**Developed by Stephanie Schmeltzer, CUNY School of Public Health
for the DC Food Policy Council**

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Definitions

Community Eligibility Provision (CEP): A federal meal funding option that enables schools and school districts to provide free meals when a high percentage of families qualify.

Food Insecurity: The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.

Healthy Schools Act of 2010 (HSA): Local legislation passed by the DC Council in 2010. Established free school breakfast for all students attending participating schools. If more than 40% of students at a school qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and breakfast participation is below 75% of average daily attendance, schools must offer breakfast via Breakfast in the Classroom (elementary schools) or alternative breakfast serving models. The Act also included higher reimbursement rates for breakfast and lunch and more stringent nutrition standards than the current federal standards. The Act also eliminated reduced-price co-payment for school meals.

National School Breakfast Program: The National School Breakfast Program (SBP) provides reimbursement to states to operate breakfast programs in schools and residential childcare institutions.

National School Lunch Program: The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federal meal program operating in public and private schools and residential childcare institutions. It provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost, or free lunches to eligible children each school day.

Provision 2: Additional federal provision that offers meals to students free of charge if participating in the National School Lunch Program and/or School Breakfast Program. The first year of the provision requires schools to collect meal applications and make eligibility determinations. During the next 3 years of the program, the school makes no new eligibility determinations and counts only the total number of reimbursable meals served each day.

Universal Free School Meals: Policy that provides free breakfast and lunch to every student. Other states and advocacy organizations may refer to this policy as “Healthy School Meals For All” or “School Meals For All.”

USDA Child Nutrition Programs: USDA's child nutrition programs help ensure that children receive nutritious meals and snacks that promote their health and educational readiness. The School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program are part of the USDA Child Nutrition Programs.

Washington DC should adopt Universal Free School Meals for DC Students

Universal Free School Meals is a policy that can be passed at the federal or state level to provide free breakfast and lunch to every student. Universal free school meals increase access to school meals and reduce stigma for children who rely on free meals. In 2020, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued nationwide child nutrition waivers in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency. The waivers allowed states to offer universal free school meals to all students during the public health emergency. In Washington, DC, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) implemented this waiver by allowing participating schools to offer universal free school meals to all DC students, regardless of a family's income or eligibility status.¹

The federal waivers expired on June 30, 2022. Thus, in the 2022-2023 school year, DC public schools, public charter schools, and participating private schools are once again required to adopt the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) or collect meal applications from families who might be eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

This current system is problematic because it:

- **Creates burden for families** to apply for free or reduced-price school meals, particularly for families who might have low literacy levels, do not speak English at home, or undocumented families worried about the negative consequences of submitting personal information;
- **Decreases participation** in school meals for children whose families may not qualify for school meals, but who would still benefit from nutritious meals at school; and
- **Creates stigma** for children who rely on free and reduced-price meals at school.

Offering universal free school meals in DC ensures students receive two nutritious meals a day, which for many children make up the majority of their daily caloric intake. Students in DC currently receive free breakfast from the Healthy Schools Act of 2010 (HSA). Implementing universal free school meals will guarantee that students are able to receive lunch at no cost. Research shows that universal free school meals can help to improve food security and diet quality for children.²

Adopting universal free school meals in DC will advance racial equity, helping to address the disproportionately high rates of food insecurity experienced by Black and Latinx children.³ In DC, almost one in three (29.3%) Latinx households with children and more than one-in-five (21%) Black households with children reported food insufficiency in April 2021.⁴ A recent report ranked Washington, DC sixth out of 50 large cities as the most expensive city for monthly household bills. The current income eligibility guidelines for determining eligibility for child nutrition programs do not take the high cost of living in DC into consideration.⁶ Universal free school meals would ensure that no child's education, regardless of income, is compromised due to hunger.³

Universal Free School Meals would benefit DC children at a reasonable cost

OSSE estimates that the local budget cost of meal reimbursements for universal free school meals in DC is just over **\$8 million annually**. The cost of universal free school meals will be adjusted annually based on federal changes in meal reimbursements. This \$8 million investment would include:

- \$2.1 million to cover free breakfast;
- \$5.9 million to cover free lunch; and
- \$25,200 to cover free after-school snacks.

DC receives about \$50 million in federal and local reimbursements annually for serving breakfast, lunch, and snacks during the school year. The existing federal and local reimbursements would cover 86% of the cost needed to implement universal free school meals in DC. Schools that participate in Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) – a federal meal funding option for schools with high percentages of families who qualify – would continue to offer free school meals through CEP. OSSE would continue to ensure that schools who would receive increased federal reimbursement from participation in CEP, do so. Schools that qualify for CEP have 40% or more of identified students who directly certify to receive free meals, or qualify based on another school within their School Food Authority (SFA). Electing CEP eliminates the school’s administrative burden because:

- Administrators no longer need to collect and process school meal applications;
- Schools do not need to count and process claims based on each meal served by meal category;
- School nutrition staff are not required to collect payment for students during meal time; and
- Schools do not accumulate the burden of school meal debt for those who students are unable to pay.⁵

During the 2021-2022 school year, 212 out of 251 DC Schools were eligible for CEP, and 180 chose to participate. Eligible schools would choose not to participate in CEP because doing so could potentially have an impact on the federal reimbursements received. Schools could potentially receive higher federal reimbursements from collecting Free and Reduced Price Meals (FARM) applications compared to the reimbursements received from the CEP calculated rate. However, the District has a high CEP participation rate which helps to maximize federal reimbursements earned. Therefore, the District would be responsible for providing a lower amount to supplement the difference between the federal free meal reimbursement rate and the reduced-price and paid reimbursement rates. OSSE would be responsible for administering universal free school meal implementation, collecting data, and providing training for schools on how to execute universal free meals in schools. OSSE would require additional staff to support implementation.

Adopting universal free school meals allows for additional funding to become available to support school nutrition programs. In DC, the Healthy Schools Act mandates schools to fund free breakfast for all students. The passing of universal free school meals will remove the requirement for schools to pay out-of-pocket to support breakfast, and create opportunity for funding to be reinvested into school programs.

Universal Free School Meals improves health and academic performance

Compared to students who did not receive free school meals, students who participate in NSLP and SBP have:

- Improved academic achievement;⁷
- Experienced lower obesity rates;⁷

- Increased consumption of fruits and vegetables;⁷
- Experienced reduced nutrition deficiencies;⁷ and
- Lowered risk of behavioral issues.⁸

A 2021 study conducted by Tufts University found that school meals were of better quality compared to food sources from restaurants and grocery stores.⁹ Improving diet quality at an early age can positively impact children's overall health and well-being now and in the future.

Best Practices from Other States

States across the U.S. are implementing policies for universal free school meals. California, Maine, and Colorado have passed permanent policies that provide universal free school meals for all students. Vermont, Massachusetts, and Nevada have implemented universal free school meals for the 2022-2023 school year. Washington, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Ohio, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut, Maryland, Vermont, and Massachusetts are working to create legislation for universal free school meals to become permanent.¹⁰

California enacted universal Meals in 2021 with three key pillars, 1) expanding California's State Meal Mandate to include a nutritious breakfast and lunch for all children, 2) requiring high-poverty schools to participate in CEP or Provision 2, and 3) allocating funds to cover the cost of the universal meals program.¹¹ **The California bill is expected to cost \$650 million annually and will feed 6.2 million public school students.**^{11,12} California's supplemental funding is intended to cover the difference between the federal reimbursement rate and the reduced-price and paid reimbursement rates.¹¹ **Maine enacted universal free school meals with a similar operation model to California.** The bill is expected to cost \$34 million and will feed 173,000 students. **Vermont, Massachusetts, and Nevada** have created policies to provide universal free school meals just in the 2022-2023 school year.¹⁰ Before a permanent policy can be secured, residents of these states are still recovering from the economic impact of COVID-19. States around the nation are hoping that the federal government will soon enact a policy to pass universal free school meals for all students, in all states.

How to Bring Universal Free School Meals to DC

Implementing universal free school meals benefits students, their families, and school administrators.¹³ The District should allocate \$8 million annually to OSSE to support meal reimbursements for universal free school meals. Additional funding for OSSE would be needed to support updating systems and staff to educate, train, and maintain universal free school meals administration.

Compared to other states, DC has a financial advantage of making universal free school meals viable due to DC schools' high CEP participation rate. The high CEP participation rate guarantees maximum reimbursements received by the federal government. Therefore, DC would have less financial responsibility to cover the remaining cost of the paid meals. Implementing universal free school meals to students in DC can bring better health outcomes, improve academic success, and bring financial security to parents who can't afford school meals for their children.¹³

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