

The Benefits of Universal Free School Meals



The Community Eligibility Provision enables schools to offer two no-cost meals—known as universal school meals—to all students each school day. The meals meet federal nutrition standards and help ensure students have the nutrition they need to learn throughout the day. There are other benefits as well:

Increased participation

When meals are offered to all children, school meal participation increases, in part because universal meals ends stigma—especially in middle and high schools.

Healthy kids

Kids who participate in school meals are more likely to eat fruits, vegetables, and milk. These nutrient-dense foods contribute to a healthier Body Mass Index (BMI) and lower childhood obesity. Health benefits are particularly pronounced among low income students.

Less room for error

Traditional approval for free and reduced-price meals, through paper applications, can yield errors, and some children who need meals can fall through the cracks due to transient families, language barriers and other communication breakdowns. When access to school meals is no longer linked to the application and income verification process, there is less room for error and all children are eligible to eat.

More time to eat

Universal meals eliminate the need for students to pay a cashier and allow them more time to eat.

Less stress on families

When a child eats two free, nutritious meals a day at school, it can reduce financial strain on the family food budget.

Better learners

Research shows a well-nourished child is a better learner, test-taker and participant in school.

No unpaid meal balances

Schools no longer have to foot the bill for unpaid meal fees, or try to collect them from families. This allows school nutrition staff to focus on preparing and serving healthy meals and eliminates a significant financial burden for school districts and families.

Source: Universal Free School Meals: Ensuring That All Children are Able to Learn, by Madelein Levin and Jessie Hewins.