

# Free School Meals for All WA Kids

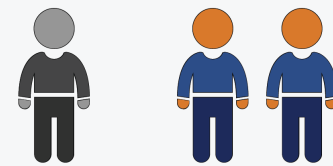
Now is the time for every student to have the same opportunity to thrive

Support HB1238 / SB5339

## Regular, nutritious meals are essential for students to learn and grow.

Washington has worked hard to improve access to school meals and reduce childhood hunger by providing free and reduced-price meals, eliminating the co-pay for breakfast and lunch, banning 'lunch shaming' practices, and passing Breakfast After the Bell legislation. Last year, the Legislature expanded use of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) that allows certain high-need, high poverty schools to provide free meals to all their students. Yet, federal pandemic waivers that allowed Washington schools to offer meals at no charge to all students have since expired.

Despite Washington's strong track record of removing barriers to help students access healthy school meals, there are still students that are required to pay as they do not attend a school utilizing CEP or their family earns just over the threshold to qualify for subsidized meals. To qualify for free and reduced-price meals, families must be at or below 130% and 185%, respectfully, of the federal poverty level (i.e. a family of four is eligible for free meals with a maximum household income of \$36,075 or reduced-price meals with a maximum household income of \$51,338). Yet, the state's living wage for a family of four with two working adults equals a household income of \$100,755 per year.<sup>1</sup> These current requirements leave ***nearly 1 in 3 Washington students ineligible for free school meals.***



**1 in 3 Washington students is ineligible for free school meals**

## Equity for every student at every meal.

Food insecurity disproportionately impacts low-income students and students of color, in particular Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Latino children, and this was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Nationally, households with children are more likely to be food insecure than those without children (12.5% and 9.4%, respectfully).<sup>3</sup> To close the opportunity gap for low-income students and students of color, targeted strategies (e.g. expanding CEP or eliminating co-pays) aren't enough to ensure all students are exempt from the risks of hunger.

When asked about the impact of free school meals, participants state:

"[It] takes the shame away from asking for money for lunch when I know my parents don't have it."

-STUDENT

"It's made it possible to know my children will have a good nutritious meal at school instead of sending them with a pack of saltines cause we can barely afford anything."

-PARENT

## Why School Meals for All?

Free School Meals for All offers school breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost—similar to other basic education requirements, such as transportation and textbooks—and helps ensure all children have the nutrition they need to grow and thrive at school and beyond. Providing free school meals to all students during the pandemic demonstrated the tangible benefits of this important legislation to schools, families, and students.

A family of **FOUR** with **TWO** students receiving **FREE** school meals saves a total of **\$120-150/MONTH**

**SAVING** can help...

- pay for RENT
- pay for UTILITIES
- pay for HEALTH CARE
- pay for CHILD CARE

- **Reduces child hunger and supports families.** As food prices remain stubbornly high and too many families struggle to feed their children or pay school meal debts, school meals at no cost provide financial relief to families by reducing food insecurity, which is linked to poor academic outcomes for children.<sup>4</sup> When all students have access to free school meals, families can focus on other basic needs and ensure no child goes hungry.
- **Supports student learning.** When children are forced to skip meals or can't access high quality nutrition, their academic performance suffers. Hungry children are more likely to have lower math and reading scores, repeat a grade, and exhibit oppositional or aggressive behavior.<sup>5,6</sup> Participation in school meals is linked to improved academic achievement, standardized test scores, cognitive function, and improved attendance.<sup>7,8,9,10,11</sup>
- **Creates healthy, thriving students.** Children who do not have enough to eat are more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression and have trouble paying attention in school than their classmates who have enough to eat.<sup>12</sup> School meals have positive health impacts for kids by reducing poor health outcomes and obesity rates, improving student behavior and mental health, and reducing anxiety and depression.<sup>13,14</sup>
- **Improves child nutrition.** Research demonstrates that school meals are among the top nutritious sources of food for kids, and participation in school meal programs can improve nutrition by increasing consumption of fruit, vegetables, and milk.<sup>15,16</sup>
- **Removes stigma.** The stigma felt by many students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals can discourage participation for both paying students and low-income students.<sup>17</sup> When everyone has access to the same services, it reduces stigma and allows more students to benefit from school meals.
- **Less administrative costs.** When all students receive free meals, it alleviates the administrative burden of collecting and processing school meal applications and tracking school meal debt. This allows school nutrition departments to focus those resources on serving nutritious meals to kids.
- **Supports WA growers & producers.** School meal programs are required to use food grown domestically. A considerable amount of food served in Washington schools, as well schools across the nation, is grown in-state, greatly supporting our local producers and food economy.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Massachusetts Institute of Technology Living Wage Calculator. (2022). Retrieved January 19, 2023, from <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/53>
- <sup>2</sup> Drewnowski, A., Otten, J. J., Lewis, L. R., Collier, S. M., Sivaramakrishnan, B., Rose, C. M., Ismach, A., Nguyen, E., & Buszkiewicz, J. (July 2021). *Food Security and Access Amid COVID-19: A Comprehensive Look at the Second Survey of Washington State Households*, Research Brief 9. Washington State Food Security Survey, from <https://nutr.uw.edu/cphn/wafood/brief-9>
- <sup>3</sup> USDA ERS - Key Statistics & Graphics. (n.d.). Retrieved January 9, 2023, from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/key-statistics-graphics/>
- <sup>4</sup> Huang, J., & Barnidge, E. (2016). *Low-income children's participation in the National School Lunch Program and household food insufficiency*. *Soc Sci Med*, 8-14.
- <sup>5</sup> Alaimo, K., Olson, C. M., & Frongillo Jr, E. (2001). *Food Insecurity and American School-Aged Children's Cognitive, Academic and Psychosocial Development*. *Pediatrics*, 44-53.
- <sup>6,12</sup> Kleinman, R. E., Murphy, J.M., Little, M., Pagano, M., Wehler, C.A., Regal, K., & Jellinek, M.S. (1998). *Hunger in Children in the United States: Potential Behavioral and Emotional*. *Pediatrics*.
- <sup>7</sup> Vaisman, N., Voet, H., Akivis, A., & Vakil, E. (1996). *Effect of Breakfast Timing on Cognitive Functions of Elementary School Students*. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 1089-1092.
- <sup>8</sup> Prome, L. T., Steger, F. L., Schubert, M. M., Lee, J., Willis, E. A., Sullivan, D. K., Szabo-Reed, A. N., Washburn, R. A., & Donnelly, J. E. (2016). *Breakfast intake and composition is associated with superior academic achievement in elementary schoolchildren*. *J Am Coll Nutr*, 326-33.
- <sup>9</sup> Frisvold, D. E. (2015). *Nutrition & cognitive achievement: an evaluation of the School Breakfast Program*. *Journal of Public Economics*, 91-104.
- <sup>10</sup> Murphy, J. M. (2007). *Breakfast and learning: an updated review*. *Current Nutrition & Food Science*, 3-36.
- <sup>11</sup> Basch, C. E. (2011). *Breakfast and the achievement gap among urban minority youth*. *J Sch Health*, 635-640.
- <sup>13</sup> Gunderson, C., Kreider, B., & Pepper, J. (2012). *The impact of the National School Lunch Program on child health: a nonparametric bounds analysis*. *Journal of Econometrics*, 79-91.
- <sup>14</sup> Gordon, N. E., & Ruffini, K. J. (2018). *School Nutrition and Student Discipline: Effects of Schoolwide Free Meals*. Retrieved January 9, 2023, from <https://www.nber.org/papers/w24986>
- <sup>15</sup> *Study Finds Americans Eat Food of Mostly Poor Nutritional Quality – Except at School | Tufts Now*. (2021). Retrieved January 9, 2023, from <https://now.tufts.edu/2021/04/12/study-finds-americans-eat-food-mostly-poor-nutritional-quality-except-school>
- <sup>16</sup> Clark, M. A., & Fox, M. K. (2009). *Nutritional quality of the diets of U.S. public school children and the role of the school meal programs*. *J Am Diet Assoc*, S44-S56.
- <sup>17</sup> Leos-Urbel, J., Schwartz, A. E., Weinstein, M., & Corcoran, S. (2013). *Not just for poor kids: The impact of universal free school breakfast on meal participation and student outcomes*. *Economics of Education Review*, 88-107.

The Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition is a statewide coalition of organizations and individuals committed to ending hunger and fighting poverty in Washington.

**Contact:** Claire Lane, Director,  
Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition  
[Claire.Lane2@gmail.com](mailto:Claire.Lane2@gmail.com), 206-446-0966