

# Free School Meals for All WA Kids

Now is the time for every student in WA 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, as federal pandemic waivers that allowed Washington schools to offer meals at no charge to all students were set to expire, the Legislature expanded the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) that allowed certain high-need, high poverty schools to provide free meals to all their students.



**1.1 million** students in Washington



**800,000** currently receive meals at no cost

**new legislation provides eligibility to 330,000 students**

**all 1.1 million WA students eligible to receive free meals**

Source: OSPI Superintendent Reykdal press conference, January 9, 2023.

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 for meals 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 4 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).

**Currently, approximately 30% of students (330,000) remain ineligible for meals at no-cost under the current requirements.**

## 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, which was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Nationally, households with children are more likely to be food insecure than those without children (12.5% and 9.4%, respectfully).<sup>2</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 risk of hunger.

**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

## 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.

- **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, free school meals can provide financial relief to struggling families by reducing food insecurity, which is linked to poor academic outcomes for children.<sup>3</sup> When all students have access to free school meals, it allows families to focus on other basic needs and ensures no student 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>4,5</sup> Participation in school meals is linked to improved academic achievement, standardized test scores, and cognitive function, as well as improved attendance, which is positively linked to academic achievement.<sup>6,7,8,9,10</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>11</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>12,13</sup>
- **Improves child nutrition.** Research demonstrates that school meals are among the top nutritious sources of food for kids, and that participation in school meal programs can improve nutrition by increasing the consumption of fruit, vegetables, and milk.<sup>14,15</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>16</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; therefore, allowing school nutrition departments to focus those resources on serving nutritious meals.

“The last few years have been a roller coaster and we've been unsure on so much. Having free lunches was one less thing to worry about. I am grateful for it.”

—PARENT

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

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