

Free School Meals for All WA Kids

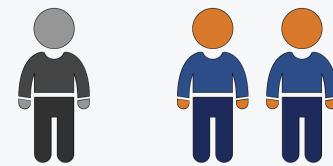
Now is the time for every student to have the same opportunity to thrive

Support HB2058 / SB5964

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, annual family incomes must be at or below 130% (\$39,000 for family of 4) and 185% of the federal poverty level (\$55,500 for family of 4). Yet, the state's living wage for a family of four with two working adults equals a household income of \$100,755 per year.¹ 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.² Nationally, households with children are more likely to be food insecure than those without children (12.5% and 9.4%, respectfully).³ 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.⁴ 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.^{5,6} Participation in school meals is linked to improved academic achievement, standardized test scores, cognitive function, and improved attendance.^{7,8,9,10,11}
- **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.¹² 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.^{13,14}
- **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.^{15,16}
- **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.¹⁷ 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.

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

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