

Universal School Meals Program Act

Bill Summary

Provides Free Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner, and a Snack to All School Children

In the richest country in the world, no child should go hungry. The Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates that [over 14 million children](#) live in food-insecure households. Schools across the nation play an important role in combatting child hunger and [improving](#) these students' nutrition, physical and mental health, school attendance, and academic achievement. Through a combination of state initiatives and flexible federal provisions, many schools provide free breakfast and lunch to all students regardless of their income. [Research](#) finds medium and large schools actually see cost savings while maintaining nutritional standards through this universal model.

Unfortunately, Congress has not yet passed a permanent solution to provide free meals to all students. Our bill provides a way for schools to provide the best and most cost-effective model for feeding all students.

The Universal School Meals Program Act would provide free breakfast, lunch, dinner, and a snack to every student—without demanding they prove they are poor enough to deserve help getting three meals a day. Many students from homes with incomes just above 130% of the poverty line, \$41,800 for a family of four, are unable to receive free meals at school. Moreover, not all eligible students participate in the program for a variety of reasons, including [burdensome application paperwork](#) and [stigma](#). Our bill puts an end to the burdensome paperwork for both schools and families by eliminating the application to participate in the program and recognizing the importance of working towards an improved school-level poverty measure. It is time to build off of the success of the universal meals structures in place and eliminate the stigma some children fear of being labeled “poor” by their classmates once and for all. Every child deserves to eat.

This is not a radical idea: in fact, schools across the country provided free meals to all students with [great success](#) from March 2020 through June 2022. While the federal waiver allowing this expansion expired at the end of the 2021 – 2022 school year, the fight is not over. Nine States—Vermont, Minnesota, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Mexico, and New York—passed laws to provide universal school meals.

This legislation builds off that success and offers major benefits to students, families, public schools, and communities. Studies show that students with access to free breakfast have [improved attendance rates](#) and [perform better in school](#). Free and accessible school meals have also been shown to [reduce financial stress](#) for students and families, [improve health outcomes](#) in students, [reduce stigma](#) associated with the programs, and lead to fewer behavioral incidents and [lower suspension rates](#).

Offering universal school meals benefits students and their parents, teachers, and schools. One [2023 study](#) found that families reported school meals for all helped 75% of parents reduce stress and at least 80% of parents save time and money.

Parents will not be troubled with redundant paperwork, subjected to threats to have their [children taken away](#), or saddled with [burdensome debt](#). Teachers, who rank [hunger as a top three priority](#) in children's health, and school administrators can expect fewer behavioral incidents and lower [suspension rates](#).

The Universal School Meals Program Act of 2026:

Puts an End to School Lunch Shaming

Children should not be publicly shamed for being unable to afford lunch. Yet as [USDA reported](#), lunch shaming is a problem throughout the country, with some schools even withholding grades over school meal debt. Some schools resorted to heinous scare tactics to collect school meal debt, such as making students serve food to their peers, [threatening to take away](#) parents' children, serving students with lower quality food, and marking children's skin with an "[I Need Lunch Money](#)" stamp. Our bill would prohibit federally funded schools from denying any child a prepared hot breakfast or lunch.

Increases the Reimbursement Rate for School Meals

Current reimbursement rates are insufficient to cover the cost of producing meals. Our bill increases the reimbursement rates in all schools to \$3.28 for breakfast and \$5.42 for lunch and dinner. [A 2021 study](#) also found that schools participating in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) to provide universal meals at their school—when accounting for food, labor, and administrative costs—spent 67 cents less per lunch and 58 cents less per breakfast than schools that do not participate but qualify for CEP.

Provides an Additional Incentive for Local Food Procurement

Including local foods in school meals protects and promotes small family farms, enriches local economies, and provides nutritious ingredients for our kids. Every dollar spent on local food generates over [two dollars in local economic activity](#). Local food programs provide hands-on education about proper nutrition, regional crops, traditional Native foods, farming techniques, and environmental stewardship. That is why our bill provides an incentive up to \$0.30 per meal for schools that procure 25% of their food from local sources. The bill defines local as food produced within state lines or within 250 miles of the purchasing School Food Authority. If all schools met the 25% local food criteria for school meals, it would provide local farmers with billions of dollars of additional income each year—an enormous investment for our rural communities.

Reimburses Schools for All Delinquent School Meal Debt

In a 2025 survey, the School Nutrition Association found that [nearly 1,400 school districts](#) across the country hold a median of \$6,000 in unpaid meal debt. Other parents whose children are eligible to receive free meals have ended up in [burdensome debt](#) simply because of clerical errors. This bill would reimburse schools for all of their delinquent debt and stop the harassment of parents and students.

Provides Summer Meals to All Children and Increased SUN Bucks (Summer EBT) to Lower-Income Children

Over [29 million children](#) in this country rely on free or reduced-price lunch. When the school year ends, families who rely on these programs do not magically make more money, their bills do not

disappear for three months, and they are all too often forced to choose between housing and food. The Summer Food Service Program provides an opportunity for children to enjoy healthy meals with their peers during the summer months. Currently, only communities where 50% of children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch may operate a summer meals program. Our bill makes all communities eligible, regardless of income.

While community meal sites provide an excellent opportunity for children to eat a healthy meal together, many parents, particularly in rural areas, struggle to get their children to a meal site. That is why our bill provides \$60 per month per child for the SUN Bucks (Summer EBT) program and makes all children in participating states eligible for the program, helping families purchase food during the summer months. SUN Bucks has proven to be effective in reducing hunger and improving nutrition. According to a USDA report, the program has reduced the most severe forms of food insecurity by a [third](#) and parents and caregivers were [enthusiastic](#) about increased access to fruits and vegetables.

Strengthens and Expands the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

Our bill expands the number of allowable meal services for center- and home-based child care providers, Head Start programs, and adult care centers to three meals and a snack per day. This third meal will ensure children get the food they need while their parents are at work.

CACFP can be overly burdensome for child care providers and families. Currently, home-based child care providers that wish to be reimbursed at the highest rate must track the participating families' incomes or operate in areas where 50% of children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. CACFP is often the only form of public funding that these child care providers receive, and we must reduce the administrative barriers for family child care providers to be reimbursed at a fair rate. Our bill would eliminate the two-tiered reimbursement rate for CACFP and allow family child care providers to receive the highest reimbursement rate regardless of income.

Amends Other Laws Referring to Free-and-Reduced Price Lunch

Recognizing that several existing programs and laws rely on FRPL data for targeting resources to schools and communities with the highest number or percentage of students from low-income backgrounds, our bill supports the use of direct certification and survey data for such targeting.