

Universal School Meals Program Act

Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Ilhan Omar

Bill Summary

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

The Universal School Meals bill would provide free breakfast, lunch, and dinner to every student – without demanding they prove they are poor enough to deserve help getting three meals a day. Currently, only students from homes with incomes below 185 percent of the poverty line (\$47,600 for a family of four) can enroll in free or reduced-price meals at school. Unfortunately, not all eligible students participate in the program and many students whose families struggle to make ends meet are deemed ineligible. We will eliminate the stigma some children fear of being labeled “poor” by their classmates. Every child deserves to eat.

Offering universal school meals benefits students and their parents, teachers, and schools. Multiple studies show that students with access to free breakfast have improved [attendance rates](#) and [perform better in school](#). Other studies have shown that children with access to universal schools meals have improved [health outcomes](#). Parents will not be troubled with redundant paperwork or, as we have seen in recent months, 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](#). More and more schools are seeing the benefits of offering universal school meals to all children. In fact, [school participation](#) rates in the universal school meals program more than doubled from 2014 to 2018.

Puts an End to School Lunch Shaming

In the richest country in the world, no child should be denied a school meal because they can’t afford to pay. As we have seen in recent news reports, children have been publicly shamed for not being able to afford lunch, and as USDA reported, nearly half of all school districts [shamed students](#) in the lunch line. Our bill would prohibit federally funded schools from denying any child a prepared hot lunch or breakfast.

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 line with USDA’s estimated [cost of producing meals](#) to \$2.72 for breakfast and \$3.81 for lunch and dinner.

Provides an Additional Incentive for Local Food Procurement

Including local foods in school meals protects and promotes small family farms, enriches the local economy, and provides nutritious ingredients. 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 a \$0.30 per meal incentive for schools that procure 30 percent 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.

Reimburses Schools for All Delinquent School Meal Debt

[Seventy-five percent](#) of school districts report carrying school lunch debt, which in some cases can be hundreds of thousands of dollars. Some schools have resorted to heinous scare tactics to collect school meal debt; recently, a school [threatened to take away](#) parents' children and another school marked children's skin with an "[I Need Lunch Money](#)" stamp. Other parents whose children are eligible to receive free meals are ending 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 Summer EBT to Lower-Income Children

[Twenty-nine 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 percent 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 an additional \$60 per month per child on EBT cards to help families in need purchase food during the summer months. The Summer EBT Program 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 [33 percent](#). The report also found that children in households receiving these benefits ate more nutritious food, consuming 12 percent more fruits and vegetables than those in households not enrolled in the program.

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

Post-recession, families are more likely to have an [untraditional work schedule](#). This means kids are in child care longer. Our bill expands the number of allowable meal services for child care providers 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 is overly burdensome for child care providers and families. Currently, child care providers that wish to be reimbursed at the highest rate for must track the participating families' incomes or operate in areas where 50 percent of children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Our bill would eliminate the two tiered reimbursement rate for CACFP and allow child care providers to receive the highest reimbursement rate regardless of income.

Empowers Schools to Collect Title I Funding Information from Existing Resources

For years, schools have relied on free and reduced-price lunch information to qualify for Title I funding. Title I is essential to help schools provide additional resources to low-income kids. We empower schools to collect relevant data using existing resources and without putting the burden on individual families to report their income.