

Support the Universal School Meals Program Act of 2021

The Universal School Meals Program Act of 2021 ([S. 1530](#) / [H.R. 3115](#)), introduced by Senators Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Representatives Ilhan Omar (D-MN) and Gwen Moore (D-WI), would ensure that every child has access to free nutritious meals at school, after school, during the summer, and at child care through the child nutrition programs. These critical programs reduce childhood hunger, decrease childhood overweight and obesity, improve child nutrition and wellness, enhance child development and school readiness, and support academic achievement. Refer to this list of [Senate cosponsors](#) and [House cosponsors](#).

What Child Nutrition Programs are Impacted?

The School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program provide funding to school districts to serve nutritious breakfasts, lunches, and afterschool snacks. Despite the myriad ways that these programs help children, there are shortfalls in participation: the School Breakfast Program serves just over half of the low-income children who participate in school lunch; too many children who need free or reduced-price school meals are not certified to receive them; the eligibility requirement for free school meals keeps school meals out of reach for many low-income families; and schools are struggling to respond to school meals debt.

The Afterschool Nutrition Programs and the Summer Food Service Program help to ensure that children are not hungry after school or during the long summer vacation. The healthy meals and snacks that these programs provide help draw children into educational and enrichment activities that keep children safe and learning while their parents are working. Once again, too many children are missing out on these programs. Only 2.8 million children received a summer lunch on an average day in July 2019 — that's only 1 in 7 of

the low-income children participating in school lunch during the school year. Afterschool suppers served only 1.4 million children on an average school day in October 2019.

The Child and Adult Care Food Program provides funding to serve healthy meals and snacks in Head Start, child care centers, family child care homes, and afterschool programs. This program supports good nutrition and high-quality and affordable child care, which help children develop fully and enter and attend school ready to learn while their parents are at work. Unfortunately, under the current rules, this program is unable to provide meals and snacks for millions of young children in child care.

What Does the Universal School Meals Program Act of 2021 Propose?

- **Provide school breakfast and lunch at no charge to all children.** Currently, only students from homes with incomes below 130 percent of the poverty line are eligible for free school meals. Many struggling families do not qualify for free school meals, and the school meal fee can be a barrier to participation.¹ Offering free meals to all students eliminates the cost barrier for children whose families' income is near the cutoff line to receive free school meals. By having every student participate in school meals, this provision would eliminate the stigma some children fear of being labeled "poor" by their classmates. Offering meals at no charge means that schools no longer have to collect unpaid meal fees from families or foot the bill for meals served when children do not have money to pay. Removing this dynamic between families and schools allows school nutrition staff to focus on preparing and serving healthy meals to children, and it eliminates a significant financial burden for school districts and families.

¹ Students whose household income is between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty line are eligible for reduced-price meals and can be charged 30 cents for breakfast and 40 cents for lunch.

■ **Increase school breakfast and school lunch reimbursements rates to match the recommended rates of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study (April 2019).** To be in line with USDA’s estimated cost of producing meals, reimbursements would increase to \$2.72 for breakfast and \$3.81 for lunch and dinner, and then be adjusted annually for inflation.

■ **Provide free afterschool and summer meals and snacks to all children.** Currently, an afterschool or summer meal site must be located in an area in which 50 percent or more of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.² The Act would eliminate the eligibility test, allowing all communities to offer afterschool and summer meals. It also would expand the number of meal services eligible for reimbursement to three meals and one snack per child per day during the summer, on weekends, and during school holidays (which is consistent with the current number of meals that can be provided on a regular school day), and would allow schools to provide afterschool suppers through the National School Lunch Program.

■ **Expand Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) to all low-income children.** Families whose children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals would receive a monthly benefit of \$60 per month per child on a debit card to purchase food during the summer months. A 2016 report on Summer EBT found that it reduced the most severe type of food insecurity (very low food security) by one-third, and food insecurity by one-fifth. Summer EBT is a valuable complement to the Summer Nutrition Programs, and offers an important opportunity to reduce food insecurity for low-income families.

■ **Provide up to three meals a day and a snack at no charge to children in child care.** Currently, child care centers and homes are only reimbursed for a maximum of two meals and a snack, so the Act would allow child care centers and homes to fully meet the nutritional needs of children while they are in care. Child care centers would be reimbursed at the free rate for all meals and snacks served, and all child care homes would receive the higher tier 1 rate.

■ **Provide a 30-cent reimbursement for schools that procure local foods.** Including local food offerings can improve the appeal of meals and snacks and strengthen the connection communities have with fresh, healthy food and local food producers. The Act defines “local” as food produced within state lines or within 250 miles of the purchasing School Food Authority.

How Would the Universal School Meals Program Act of 2021 Benefit Communities?

Recent studies document that access to nutritious meals in school and child care increase the health and educational outcomes for our nation’s children. Investing in these programs to ensure all children — regardless of income — can access healthy meals year-round would help ensure that every child is ready to learn and thrive. The Act would allow schools, afterschool and summer programs, and child care centers and homes to focus on providing the healthiest and most appealing meals possible instead of spending resources processing applications and completing other administrative work. The Act also would eliminate unpaid school meals fees and the stigmatizing practices that have been linked to school meals debt.

² The Summer Food Service Program’s eligibility rules allow enrolled sites to participate if at least half of the children served are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.