

# SCHOOL MEALS ARE ESSENTIAL TO STUDENT HEALTH



Providing School Meals for All ensures every student has access to the nutrition they need.

A hungry student cannot learn, but school meals provide more than just momentary fuel for a young learner. School meals can account for nearly half of a child's daily calories, particularly for lower-income students who may or may not have reliable healthy meals at home.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, federal nutrition standards paired with the hard work of school nutrition staff across the Commonwealth ensure that school meals are nutritious.

School Meals for All would increase access to this valuable source of healthy meals by removing barriers such as paperwork and an outdated measurement of poverty that keeps far too many food insecure children from qualifying for free or reduced-price school meals. Feeding America estimates, as of 2019, 26% of food insecure children were above that threshold.<sup>2</sup>

## School Meals for All decreases food insecurity

Participation in school meals has been associated with lower rates of food insecurity both by providing breakfast and/or lunch to children who may reside in a food insecure household, but also by increasing the purchasing power of the household.

- School Meals for All through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) was simulated to lead to a 3.73% decrease in food insecurity by school-aged children. As this also benefits their households, CEP was also estimated to decrease food insecurity by 3.17% for households by increasing household purchasing power.<sup>3</sup>
- In a comparison of CEP vs non-CEP schools in Maryland, students attending a district that did not opt to participate in CEP were twice as likely to be in a food insecure household.<sup>4</sup>

## School meals improve short and long-term health outcomes

- A study of 2013–2015 surveys suggests that eating school lunch is associated with healthier dietary intake, and that consuming school meals can potentially result in higher nutritional benefits.
- Children who consume school meals more than 4 times a week eat more dairy, vegetables, and fruits than those who eat school meals 0–3 times a week.<sup>5</sup>
- Eating school meals helps children and teens make better dietary choices. One study found that participation in school meals correlated with a reduction in eating unhealthy snacks outside of school.<sup>6</sup>
- Receiving free or reduced-price school lunches reduces poor health by at least 29 percent based on estimates using national data, and reduces obesity by 17 percent.<sup>7</sup>

**THE MASSACHUSETTS LEGISLATURE CAN MAKE A SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENT IN THE EDUCATION AND HEALTH OF STUDENTS BY PASSING SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL (H.714/S.314).**

## School meals are nutritious and recent improvements are making them even better

Research has found time and time, again, that school meals are healthy. The improved standards initiated by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 have helped ensure that meals purchased and consumed at school rank among the healthiest sources of food.

- Food consumed at school had the highest quality as measured by the American Heart Association diet score and the Healthy Eating Index. Healthier than food purchased from grocery stores, consumed at a worksite, purchased from a restaurant or other sources.<sup>8</sup>
- Several studies have found that school meals are at least as healthy as schools packed from home and for many households across all demographics school meals may in fact be healthier than meals prepared at home.<sup>9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15</sup>
- USDA found in its School Nutrition and Meal Cost study that the Healthy Eating Index scores of school lunches went up 41% from 57.9% in the 2009–2010 school year to 81.5% in the 2014–2015 school year in the midst of implementation of improved meal standards.<sup>16</sup>

## School Meals for All increases the health benefits of school meals

When schools adopt universal school meals under programs such as CEP they experience an increase in participation and decrease in administrative costs. This increase in revenue has allowed many communities to invest in training, staff, equipment, or higher quality ingredients.

- Springfield Public Schools saw a 43.5% increase in school food program revenue between 2014 and 2017, a period in which they adopted School Meals for All through CEP. This has allowed them to make several improvements to quality including sourcing whole ingredients and processing it at their new Culinary & Nutrition Center.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Cullen, Karen Weber and Chen, Tzu-An. The contribution of the USDA school breakfast and lunch program meals to student daily dietary intake. *Preventive Medicine Reports*. 2017, 5, 82–85

<sup>2</sup> Feeding America. Child Food Insecurity in Massachusetts. (2020) Map the Meal Gap. <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2019/child/massachusetts>

<sup>3</sup> Poblacion, A.; Cook, J.; Ettinger de Cuba, S.; Bovell, A.; Sheward, R.; Pasquariello, J.; Cutts, D. Can food insecurity be reduced in the United States by improving SNAP, WIC, and the community eligibility provision? *World Med. Health Policy* 2017, 9, 435–455

<sup>4</sup> Gross, S.M.; Kelley, T.L.; Augustyn, M.; Wilson, M.J.; Bassarab, K.; Palmer, A. Household Food Security Status of Families with Children Attending Schools that Participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and Those with Children Attending Schools that are CEP-Eligible, but Not Participating. *J. Hunger Environ. Nutr.* 2019, 1–16.

<sup>5</sup> Au, Lauren E., Klara Gurzo, Wendi Gosliner, Karen L. Webb, Patricia B. Crawford, and Lorrene D. Ritchie. "Eating School Meals Daily Is Associated with Healthier Dietary Intakes: The Healthy Communities Study." *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* 118, no. 8 (August 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2018.01.010>.

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, J.F.; Findling, M.T.G.; Rosenfeld, L.; Smith, L.; Rimm, E.B.; Hoffman, J.A. The impact of 1 year of healthier school food policies on students' diets during and outside of the school day. *J. Acad. Nutr Diet.* 2018, 118, 2296–2301.

<sup>7</sup> ScienceDaily. "U.S. National School Lunch Program Improves Health of Children in Low-Income Households, Study Suggests." Accessed July 8, 2021. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/11/1111110142106.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Liu, Junxiu, Renata Micha, Yan Li, and Dariush Mozaffarian. "Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003–2018." *JAMA Network Open* 4, no. 4 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.5262>.

<sup>9</sup> Crepinsek, M.K., Singh, A., Bernstein, L.S. & McLaughlin, J.E. (2016). Dietary effects of universal-free school breakfast: finding from the evaluation of the School Breakfast Program Pilot Project. *Journal of American Dietetic Association*, 106(11), 1796–1803

<sup>10</sup> Polonsky, H.M., Davey, A Bauer, K.W., Foster, G.D.Sherman, S., Abel, M.L., Dale, L.C. & Fisher, J.O. (2018). Breakfast quality varies by location among low-income ethnically diverse children in public urban schools. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 50(2), 190–197

<sup>11</sup> Vernarelli, J.A., & O'Brien, B. (2017). A vote for school lunches: school lunches provide superior nutrient quality than lunches obtained from other sources in a nationally representative sample of US children, *Nutrients*, 9(9), E924

<sup>12</sup> Farris, A.R., Misyak, S., Duffey, K.J., Davis, G.C., Hosig, K., Atzaba-Poria, N., McFerren, M.M., & Serrano, E.L. (2014). Nutritional comparison of packed and school lunches in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children following the implementation of the 2012–2013 National School Lunch Program

<sup>13</sup> Hubbard, K.L., Must, A., Eliasziw, M., Folta, S.C., & Goldberg, J. (2014). What's in children's backpacks: foods brought from home. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 114(9), 1424–1431.

<sup>14</sup> Caruso, M.L., & Cullen, K.W. (2015). Quality and cost of student lunches brought from home. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 169(1), 86–90

<sup>15</sup> Fox, M.K.; Gearan, E.; Cabili, C.; Dotter, D.; Niland, K.; Washburn, L.; Paxton, N.; Olsho, L.; LeClair, L.; Tran, V. School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study Final Report Volume 4: Student Participation, Satisfaction, Plate Waste, and Dietary Intakes. *Math. Policy Res.* 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Fox, Mary Kay, and Elizabeth Gearan. "School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study: Summary of Findings," 2019, 52.

<sup>17</sup> "Springfield Schools: When You Nourish, They Flourish." Undeniably Dairy. National Dairy Council, Springfield Public Schools and New England Dairy & Food Council, October 2019. <https://www.riseandshinema.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/SPS-When-You-Nourish-They-Flourish-Case-Study-October-2017.pdf>.