

# SCHOOL MEALS ARE ESSENTIAL TO EDUCATION



Passing SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL is vital to the success of educating children in our schools.

School meals provide important nutritional benefits, and proper nutrition has a profound impact on education outcomes for school aged children. School meals can account for nearly half of a child's daily calories, which is especially important for children who cannot access reliable meals outside of school. Students are able to pay closer attention, perform at a higher level, and regulate their emotions better when they are not hungry.<sup>1</sup>

An Act Relative to Universal School Meals would ensure that all students have access to healthy, reliable meals. This would allow thousands of children access to nutritious food, and break down the stigma surrounding free school meals, leading to greater participation. The state's investment in education is the second largest part of the budget, after healthcare. If we want schools to succeed in educating children, we need to pass School Meals for All.

It's time for the Massachusetts Legislature to make this critical investment in solving childhood hunger and education outcomes by passing School Meals for All.

## SCHOOL MEALS IMPROVES PERFORMANCE

In and out of school, research has proven that food is necessary not only for physical health, but for the cognition required to learn and perform academic or intellectual tasks. More concisely—a hungry student cannot learn.

- A study conducted by Ron Kleinman, Chair of Pediatrics at Massachusetts General Hospital, and his colleagues found significant improvements in academic performance (i.e. math test scores) when universal breakfast was offered within Boston schools.<sup>2</sup>
- There were positive trends found in standardized achievement test scores within six elementary schools (compared with three control schools) in Minnesota after piloting universal free breakfasts.<sup>3</sup>
- South Carolina students in grades 3-8 found that school meals for all through the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) was positively associated with improved math test scores.<sup>4</sup>
- In a study conducted in Vermont, CEP was associated with higher perceptions of improved academic performance and readiness to learn according to school staff surveys.<sup>5</sup>
- In New York City middle schools utilizing Provision 2, another federal option for school meals for all, math and English Language Arts standardized test scores were significantly higher, with the biggest improvement for higher-income students.<sup>6</sup>
- A longitudinal study looking at adults who participated in school meals between 1941 and 1956 saw an impact on long-term education attainment, particularly length of time in educational pursuits (i.e. finishing school) by a full year for men.<sup>7</sup>

## SCHOOL MEALS IMPROVES ATTENDANCE

As stated above, a hungry student cannot learn, but a student that misses school due to illness or other reasons certainly cannot fully participate in receiving an education. School meals help students stay healthy and provide an additional benefit for children attending school daily.

- From a study in Boston, students who improved their nutritional status due to participating in the School Breakfast Program, improved their attendance.<sup>8</sup>
- In Wisconsin, a study of 37 CEP elementary schools and 104 eligible, but not utilizing CEP schools, CEP lowered the number of low-income students with low attendance by 3.5% after 2 years of implementation.<sup>9</sup>

## SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL IMPROVES SCHOOL FOOD FINANCES

School meal programs are typically expected to be autonomous. Revenue from federal reimbursements and student payments are, in theory, expected to cover salaries, equipment, food, and other supplies needed to produce and serve breakfast and lunch. However, when a school meal program carries debt, sometimes from non-payments, the ultimate cost is covered by the school district. A financially healthy meal program can focus on improving quality while an unhealthy program can be a drain on a district's resources.

- A USDA evaluation of universal free breakfast found that while increased participation did increase labor costs, these were more than offset by the increase in federal reimbursements with an average savings of \$0.11 per breakfast.
- In a different report, the USDA found CEP led to staff spending 68 minutes less per student per year on administrative tasks such as distributing and processing applications for free or reduced-price meals, and verifying eligibility. This represented a labor cost savings of roughly \$29 per student per year.
- A study of New York City schools using data from before and after CEP adoption found free school meals improve the socio-emotional well-being of students by improving

perceptions of being bullied, fighting in school, and safety outside of school. Students who previously ate school meals before the implementation of CEP reported feeling safer within school, specifically within the cafeteria, suggesting stigma surrounding school meals was mitigated by making the program universal.<sup>10</sup>

## SCHOOL MEALS IMPROVES SOCIO-EMOTIONAL HEALTH & BEHAVIOR

Beyond concentration, the physical and mental effects of hunger make it difficult for children and teens to navigate the day in a healthy way. Participating in school meals gives students an opportunity to gain socio-emotional skills while satisfying an important physical need.

- According to nationwide data free school meals, through CEP, were shown to improve student behavior and the rate of multiple out-of-school suspension rates fell by 15 percent for elementary students and 6 percent for middle school students after implementation.<sup>11</sup>
- School breakfast participation, especially breakfast offered at no cost to all students, positively impacts children's mental health, including reductions in hyperactivity, anxiety, and depression.<sup>12</sup>
- Studies have found that access to a nutritious breakfast can enhance a student's psychosocial well-being, reduce aggression and school suspensions, and decrease discipline problems.<sup>13</sup>
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<sup>1</sup> Murphy, J. M., Wehler, C. A., Pagano, M. E., Little, M., Kleinman, R. F., & Jellinek, M. S. (1998). Relationship Between Hunger and Psychosocial Functioning in Low-Income American Children. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 37, 163-170.

<sup>2</sup> Kleinman, R.E.; Hall, S.; Green, H.; Korzec-Ramirez, D.; Patton, K.; Pagano, M.E.; Murphy, J.M. Diet, breakfast, and academic performance in children. *Ann. Nutr. Metab.* 2002, 46, 24-30.

<sup>3</sup> Wahlstrom, K.L.; Begalle, M.S. More than test scores: Results of the Universal School Breakfast Pilot in Minnesota. *Top. Clin. Nutr.* 1999, 15, 17-29.

<sup>4</sup> Gordanier, J.; Ozturk, O.; Williams, B.; Zhan, C. Free lunch for all! the effect of the community eligibility provision on academic outcomes. *Econ. Educ. Rev.* 2020, 77, 101999.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, J.; Garnett, B.; Horton, M.A.; Farineau, G. Universal Free School Meal Programs in Vermont Show Multi-domain Benefits. *J. Hunger Environ. Nutr.* 2020, 15, 753-766.

<sup>6</sup> Schwartz, A.E.; Rothbart, M.W. Let them eat lunch: The impact of universal free meals on student performance. *J. Policy Anal. Manag.* 2020, 39, 376-410.

<sup>7</sup> Hinrichs, P. (2010). The effects of the National School Lunch Program on education and health. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 29(3), 479-505.

<sup>8</sup> Kleinman, R.E.; Hall, S.; Green, H.; Korzec-Ramirez, D.; Patton, K.; Pagano, M.E.; Murphy, J.M. Diet, breakfast, and academic performance in children. *Ann. Nutr. Metab.* 2002, 46, 24-30.

<sup>9</sup> Bartfeld, J.S.; Berger, L.; Men, F. Universal Access to Free School Meals through the Community Eligibility Provision Is Associated with Better Attendance for Low-Income Elementary School Students in Wisconsin. *J. Acad. Nutr. Diet.* 2020, 120, 210-218.

<sup>10</sup> School Nutrition Association. (2019). 2019 School Nutrition Trends. <https://schoolnutrition.org/news-publications/press-releases/2019/90-of-districts-to-exceed-school-meal-whole-grain-mandates/>.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon, N. E., & Ruffini, K. J. (2018). School nutrition and student discipline: effects of schoolwide free meals. *NBER Working Paper*, 24986.

<sup>12</sup> Murphy, J. M., Pagano, M. E., Nachmani, J., Sperling, P., Kane, S., & Kleinman, R. E. (1998). The relationship of school breakfast to psychosocial and academic functioning: cross-sectional and longitudinal observations in an inner-city school sample. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 152(9), 899-907.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, J. L., Beardslee, W. H., & Prothrow-Stith, D. (2008). Impact of school breakfast on children's health and learning: An analysis of the scientific research.

<sup>14</sup> Gutierrez, Emily. (2021). The Effect of Universal Free Meals on Student Perceptions of School Climate: Evidence from New York City. (EdWorkingPaper: 21-430). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/mcqq-sd26>.