



Testimony to The House Children & Youth and the House Education Committees on the Importance of Childhood Nutrition and School Meals

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Thank you for the opportunity for the School Nutrition Association of Pennsylvania to submit testimony in support of funding breakfast for all students and covering the cost of reduced-price eligible student meals in the state budget. Furthermore, we support [House Bill 180](#) which would provide school breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students in the commonwealth during the school day. Since, 1955 the School Nutrition Association of Pennsylvania (SNAPA) has been proud to represent school food service professionals who make it their mission to impact positively the wellness of children through healthy school meals and to work to ensure high quality child nutrition programs are available in all schools in the commonwealth.

School meals are an essential part of the school day that ensure students are ready to learn. Extensive research has linked participation in school meals to a number of benefits:

- improved academic achievement, standardized test scores, and cognitive function
- improved attendance, which is positively linked to academic achievement
- reduced food insecurity, which is linked to poor academic outcomes
- improved nutrition, such as increased consumption of fruit, vegetables, and milk
- improved overall health and long-term health outcomes, as well as reduction in obesity rates, anxiety, and depression

Research shows that school meals provide the best diet quality as determined by the American Heart Association (AHA) diet score and the Healthy Eating Index (HEI), of all major food sources in the United States, without disparities for those of lower household income ([Lui et al. 2021](#)). This study looked at availability of food items that align with the Dietary Guidelines: fruit, vegetables, beans, whole grains, protein sources and fatty acids. School meals scored highest when compared to grocery stores and restaurants, because the nutrition standards that schools follow regularly provide all these food items.

Additionally, the high quality of the food offered did not change dependent on income status as it did for grocery stores and restaurants. At school, students have the same access to high quality nutritious meals regardless of their background, race or ethnicity.

During the 2022-2023 school year the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania funded breakfast at no cost to students in school, allowing us to serve even more students and ensuring they are well nourished and better prepared to learn. Among schools not participating in the Community Eligibility Program, **breakfast participation increased from 10% in 2018 to 34.4%.** Most importantly, it is not just those students who would normally pay for meals who participate more when meals are free of charge. In fact **participation of free-eligible students increased by 16% this school year while free breakfast is available for all students.** The stigma of receiving free meals is removed when all students can easily participate in the program. School meals become just another part of the school day for the benefit of all students.

The United Way ALICE (Asset limited, Income Constrained, Employed) Report from 2018 indicates that a family of four living in Pennsylvania, must earn at least \$69,648 a year to be able to afford the basic necessities to live. Yet, a family of four is not eligible to receive free school meals if their annual income exceeds \$39,000 per year. In 2020, the median house hold income in PA was \$67,587 which is below the income identified to afford basic housing, food, transportation and clothing, but well above the level to qualify for free school meals. The Income Eligibility Guidelines are no longer adequate to determine a family need for free school meals. They are antiquated and not representative of our challenging economic times.

The percentage of total enrollment of students who are eligible for free and reduced priced meals has increased from 54% in 2019 to 60% in 2022. **Two thirds of students in schools participating in the National School Lunch program are now eligible for free or reduced priced meals.** However, the Feeding America "Map the Meal Gap" - Food insecurity among populations in the united states, reports **29% of children not eligible for free meals, due to income, are still experiencing food insecurity.** These statistics indicate that there is hunger in our state that needs to be addressed. Expanding access to school meals can ensure children have a consistent, nutritious breakfast and lunch each and every day.

On behalf of school nutrition professionals, serving our students in the cafeteria every day, we urge you to support HB 180 and at minimum maintain funding for breakfast and reduced priced meals in the state budget. Expanded access to school meals through breakfast and lunch at no cost is critical to guarantee funds spent on education is money well invested and every student is ready to learn.

Scan here for
www.SNAPA.org/MealsForAll
document links





Why School Meals for All?

No child should go hungry in Pennsylvania.

1 in 8 children in Pennsylvania experience food insecurity.

Studies show that school meals:

- Reduce childhood hunger
- Decrease childhood weight issues and obesity, and improve child nutrition and wellness
- Enhance child development and school readiness
- Support learning, attendance, and behavior
- Contributes to positive mental health outcomes
- Are the healthiest meals for many children

It's about equity:

- The existing policy for school meals, where some children are expected to pay while others receive their meals for free, creates stigma and shame for those students who rely on school meals for their basic needs, and a barrier for those students who are not eligible but are still experiencing food insecurity.
 - A family of four with two parents each making \$600 gross income per week, make just \$200 too much to qualify for free and reduced school meals. Factor in the costs of living in Pennsylvania and the financial impact free school meals would provide this family.
 - Due to the limitations of the current method of collecting family income data through school meal benefit applications and the restrictive USDA income guidelines, the school meal eligibility rate never fully captures the need.
- BIPOC students are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity.
- Students aren't expected to pay for books, desks, or bus fare. Why should school breakfast and lunch be any different?

School Meals for All would streamline and strengthen school nutrition programs:

- Participation by all students in school meal programs increases when meals are provided for free, resulting in increased revenue by way of federal reimbursements.
- School Meals for All would eliminate issues of unpaid school meal debt and reduced administrative paperwork, freeing up school nutrition staff to focus on feeding kids.

The impact of hunger on outcomes for children:

- Food insecurity leads to negative lifetime health outcomes for children especially after repeated exposure.
- Childhood food insecurity results in high costs to society.