



July 6, 2022

The Honorable Governor Mike DeWine

Riffe Center, 30th Floor  
77 South High Street  
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Dear Governor DeWine,

We are the [Hunger-Free Schools Ohio coalition](#), a growing group of anti-hunger, education, food, and nutrition organizations and associations. In recognition of your commitment to child well-being in Ohio, we are requesting that you take action to continue to provide healthy school meals for all Ohio children and make all of our schools hunger-free.

The federal school meal programs have played a central role in reducing hardship during the pandemic. Since March 2020, USDA has provided waivers to schools, allowing them to serve meals at no cost to all students. These meals have been a lifeline for struggling families, but the waivers are set to expire at the end of this school year, leaving schools and students in Ohio without access to free school meals. Healthy School Meals for all Ohio students would ensure that every K-12 student in Ohio has equal access to a nutritious breakfast and lunch at school to support their health and academic success. Providing healthy school meals at no cost for every student in Ohio – regardless of income – is a critical investment in improving the health and well-being of Ohio’s students, ending child hunger in schools, and strengthening our education and health system.

### **Hunger-Free Schools are Essential for Recovery in Ohio**

The health and economic crises brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic have made school meal programs more important than ever. A record number of Ohio children do not have enough to eat, and the economic recovery for families who struggle to put food on the table will take years. The ability to serve all students a nutritious meal, regardless of income, should continue as we recover from the worst of the pandemic. Access to school meals has proven successful in improving children’s health and academic success and reducing hunger, as well as in providing families with economic relief. Research shows school meals improve school attendance, academic achievement, standardized test scores, and overall cognitive function. Consumption of school meals is also linked with greater food security, reduced obesity rates, and improved physical and mental health outcomes. Schools that implement the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) - a federal option that allows high-poverty schools to offer meals at no cost for all - report improved student behavior and decreased suspension rates. As we work to recover from the considerable economic and educational impacts of COVID-19, there has never been a more important time to continue free school meals for all.



## **Who Gets Left Behind under the Current Structure**

While many Ohio schools – predominantly our larger, urban school districts – offer meals at no cost for all through CEP, over 280,000 students in Ohio attend schools in our state that are eligible for CEP but not participating, often because they are unable to make it work financially. School meals for all students in Ohio is an equalizer, especially for smaller districts where children face amplified social stigma from their peers and schools struggle to maintain financially viable programs under the current tiered payment structure.

In addition, there are over 1 million students that attend schools that do not qualify for CEP in Ohio, yet many of these schools serve significant numbers of low-income students who fall through the cracks of the current system. In Ohio, children qualify for free meals if their household's income is at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level and reduced school meals if their household's income is at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level, which translates into an annual income of \$49,000 or less for a family of four for the 2021–2022 school year. A livable salary for a family of four in Ohio is around \$72,000.<sup>1</sup> This discrepancy between eligibility and the living wage means that many families who are struggling to meet their basic needs do not qualify for free school meals. Even among eligible families, students can be missed and not certified for free school meals, creating an undue burden of school meal debt for families and schools. Stigma further inhibits access, especially among teenage students, who often drop out of school meal programs as they get older. However, last year with the allowance of serving school meals to all students, school districts across the state saw significant increases in the uptake of school lunches.

All school districts in our state face significant challenges in supporting students and addressing non-instructional needs of children while also being tasked to nourish our children each school day. We have heard from school districts that the financial and administrative burden of shifting back to a tiered payment system for school meals after the waivers are lifted will likely have negative impacts on their school meal programs that are already operating at a deficit throughout the pandemic. School meals for all students in Ohio will allow our schools to be hunger-free, ensuring all children are fed during the school day and better prepared for learning.

## **Ohio Must Act to Avoid the Child Hunger Cliff**

There has never been a more important time to invest in school meals for all children. After June 2022, over 3,000 schools and nearly 1.4 million children across our state will lose access to free school meals for all. Earlier this year, California and Maine, and more recently, Vermont passed state legislation to avoid this child hunger cliff. Many other states are considering doing the same. Ohio can – and must – address the child hunger cliff by providing our children with meals during the school day so they can thrive in school!

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<sup>1</sup> Nadeau, Carey Ann. "Living Wage Calculator—Living Wage Calculation for New York." Living Wage Calculator, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology., <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/36>. Accessed 28 April, 2022.



We call on the DeWine Administration and the Ohio Legislature to support the following actions to make sure our children avoid the child hunger cliff:

1. Use funding, either through ARPA or other funding sources, to supplement the cost of providing school meals that are not covered by the federal government, so schools are fully reimbursed at the “free rate” for all meals they serve.
2. Maximize federal funding for school meals through requiring school districts eligible for CEP to pursue this option and providing technical assistance and best practices to school districts.

As representatives from local and state organizations that see firsthand the impact of poverty and food insecurity in Ohio, we know how life-changing free school meals for all could be for students, their families, schools, and communities. Like textbooks and transportation, school meals are a critical part of a child’s education and future success. We must take action to ensure all Ohio schools are hunger-free.

Sincerely,

[The Hunger-Free Schools Ohio Coalition](#)

