



# Hunger-Free Schools Ohio- Healthy School Meals for All

Providing healthy school meals at no cost for every student in Ohio 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. Research shows school meals improve school attendance, academic achievement, standardized test scores, and overall cognitive function. Healthy school meals are also shown to contribute to improved mental and behavioral health outcomes, an important priority of the DeWine administration. Consumption of school meals is also linked with greater food security and improved physical and mental health outcomes.

## Policy

There has never been a more important time to invest in school meals for all children. Ohio must act in this budget to avoid the child hunger cliff. Six states have passed legislation to continue providing school meals at no cost to all children (Maine, California, Vermont, Nevada, Massachusetts, and Colorado), and Pennsylvania will be providing breakfast for all students at no cost. Ohio can address child hunger by providing our children with meals during the school day so they can thrive in school. We can make the following policy decisions in Ohio's operating budget to ensure all children have access to healthy school meals.

- State supplements 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.
- Provide additional resources and education for ODE to help encourage and assist school districts eligible for Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) to pursue this option to more effectively maximize federal funding and relieve local fiscal pressures impacting the program
- In the absence of budget commitments toward school meals, the administration should prioritize anti-lunch shaming policies to ensure no student is denied access to a hot meal at school. Ohio is among those states lacking an anti-lunch shaming policy.

## Challenge

The federal school meal programs have played a central role in reducing hardship during the pandemic. Last school year, USDA provided waivers to schools, allowing them to serve meals at no cost to all students. Those meals were a lifeline for struggling families, but the waivers expired, leaving schools and students in Ohio without access to free school meals.

The last year has shown us that the current system is not reaching every student who needs it. Many families (close to 37%) facing food insecurity are above the Nutrition program threshold of 185%.

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 has been challenging and they worry that more students are going hungry.

Further, school districts across the state are reporting record levels of school meal debt, an indicator that families are struggling to make ends meet. This is troubling because some of our school districts have policies in place that require meal providers to take away a student's hot meal when they accrue a certain amount of school lunch debt. Today, in some districts in Ohio, a kindergartener may go through the lunch line ready to eat their hot school meal, only to have it taken away and instead handed a paper-bag sandwich because their family cannot afford the school meals. This is demoralizing and wrong. Ohio must do better.

## Opportunity

America's infrastructure does not just include roads and bridges; it also includes our food distribution system and how nutritious food gets to all those who need it. Free school meals for all improves our human infrastructure by ensuring that children receive the nutritious meals they need to thrive and supporting jobs and financial viability for school nutrition departments.

We have an opportunity to prioritize Ohio's children and families and make meals accessible to every child—regardless of their ability to pay. This is something that parents overwhelmingly want for their children. In fact, in a survey of over 1300 parents and caregivers with students in k-12 schools in Ohio, 87% agreed that school meals should be provided to all students regardless of their ability to pay.

## Support Child Well-Being: Budget Recommendation

- Use funding 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.
- Provide additional resources and education for school districts to maximize federal funds for school meals through encouraging school districts eligible for the CEP to pursue this option to more effectively leverage federal funding and implement best practices to maximum federal reimbursements and relieving local fiscal pressures impacting the program
- The administration must, at the very least, prioritize anti-lunch shaming policies to ensure no student is denied a hot meal at school.

This issue brief was authored by: Katherine Ungar, JD, Senior Policy Associate, Children's Defense Fund-Ohio and on behalf of [Hunger-Free Schools Ohio](#) (a broad-based coalition of over 40 organizations across the state committed to fighting childhood hunger and ensuring all children have access to nutritious meals at school)

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