



Universal School Breakfast Programs

Universal school breakfast programs help ensure students in participating schools are fed and ready to learn. You will learn about two examples of universal school meal programs. Then, you will consider some statistics and views about universal programs, take a stand on whether you think they should be expanded with additional funding, and justify your position.

Background on universal school breakfast programs

Providing breakfast at school is an effective way to protect children from hunger and food insecurity.¹ School breakfast programs have also been shown to improve behavior and academic performance² and help students maintain a healthy weight.^{3,4}

In most schools, some students pay full price for breakfast, some pay a reduced price, and some receive free breakfast. Eligibility for free and reduced-price meals is based on each student's individual economic need.

With universal meal programs, all students receive free meals regardless of their individual household income.

- The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), for example, is a federal program that provides schools with funding to help cover the cost of making breakfast and lunch free for all students.⁵
- Maryland Meals for Achievement (MMFA) is a state program that provides Maryland schools with funding to cover the cost of making breakfast free for all students. Under MMFA, breakfast must be offered after the start of the school day and eaten in the classroom.⁶

To enroll in these programs, a school must have a certain percentage of students experiencing poverty.

Statistics and views on universal school breakfast programs

- In fiscal year 2014, about 13.5 million students participated in USDA's School Breakfast Program, or about 27 percent of the country's public school students. This was more than three and a half times the number of students who participated in the program 25 years ago. Of the 2.3 billion meals served in 2014, 78 percent were provided free to the most needy students, and 7 percent were sold at reduced price to students of lesser need.^{7,8}
- In individual household eligibility-based programs, students may be able to determine who is getting free and reduced price meals. One Brooklyn student described the stigma that can be associated with getting free meals: "Imagine you're on the lunch line and another student sees you getting free lunch and takes advantage of this. I've seen name-calling, put downs, bullying, labeling ... Once this happens, you're immediately an outcast."⁹
- Researchers studying a breakfast program in a Kentucky middle school summarized students' feedback about the program in this way: "Allowing students to eat together in a common area, versus placing breakfast-eaters and non-breakfast eaters in different locations, can reduce stigma and promote 'normalcy.'"¹⁰
- The online magazine World quoted Lilian Ramos, parent of two elementary schoolchildren, on school breakfast: "They say if kids don't eat they won't learn. The truth is that many of our kids come to school already having eaten. They come here to study." The magazine said Ramos, who lives in a working-class Los Angeles neighborhood, "prepares her children a traditional hot Mexican breakfast every day and is offended the school assumes so many students come to school hungry."¹¹
- Universal social programs (those available to everyone) are "generally held to a higher standard than are programs restricted to poor people. Programs for poor people ... quickly become poor programs. The fact that more affluent parents with political clout would have an immediate stake in the quality of school meals would be a good thing for all concerned."¹²

- In some cases, school districts must pay added costs when they shift from an eligibility-based to a universal breakfast model. A Florida research group estimated in 2009 that such districts in their state would have revenue shortfalls of between \$33 and \$69 million if they made this shift.¹³
- Universal school breakfast has raised concerns about whether such programs would mean some students would gain excess weight because they were eating breakfast at home and again at school. Researchers who studied universal school breakfast programs in urban middle schools, however, concluded that “Concerns that a second breakfast at school increases risk of excessive weight gain are unsupported. Students who regularly consumed breakfasts at school, including double breakfast eaters, were more likely to exhibit a healthy weight trajectory.”¹⁴
- There are concerns that offering breakfast to all students in the classroom can lead to a lot of food being wasted. One study of two Milwaukee high schools with universal school breakfast programs found that “nearly 70 percent of the meals are fully or partially eaten,” meaning that about 30 percent go uneaten. The study also found that students were more likely to waste the healthier breakfast cereal options.¹⁵

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