

**FEED KIDS.  
SOLVE HUNGER.**

**SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL.**

# **BENEFITS OF SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL ON FAMILIES IN MASSACHUSETTS**



## **New Research Finds School Meals for All Provides Many Benefits to Families**

Every child deserves to have the food and nutrition they need to make the most of the school day, but unfortunately the barriers of cost, stigma, and bureaucracy have long kept far too many children from being able to access meals.

In Massachusetts, roughly 1 in 4 food insecure students do not qualify for subsidized meals due to household income.<sup>1</sup> The National School Lunch Program was established in the 1940s with eligibility for free meals greatly reformed in the 1970s. Massachusetts is now considering joining other states in making School Meals for All permanent in order to ensure all students have access without facing any of these barriers.

For the last five decades, students who participate in school meals have been served at fees dependent on their household income level. Those with the lowest income receive free meals, while those with slightly higher income receive meals at a reduced price. Students from all other income levels can also receive meals at school if they pay a higher fee. This means household income qualifications for school meals has allowed many of the lowest income students to receive up to 2 healthy meals at school daily at little or no cost. However, many skipped this option because paperwork was too cumbersome, the reduced-price cost was still too much for their family, or the stigma of being labeled poor was too strong. And this is only if they qualify for assistance.

New research from Dr. Juliana Cohen at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Merrimack College finds that when school meals became free to all students in Massachusetts, participation increased, stigma was reduced, and households were better able to cover other expenses. This research was based on surveys of 284 Massachusetts families with various levels of income, from the lowest income households up to 500 percent of the federal poverty level, which puts them at or just above earning a living wage according to the MIT Living Wage Calculator.<sup>2</sup> Below we share 5 key findings that support the importance of making School Meals for All permanent in Massachusetts.

## School Meals for All increases participation among students of all income levels.

In October 2022 more than an additional 80,000 students ate school lunch compared to the same month in 2019 in schools not previously providing free meals to all students.<sup>3</sup> This data provided by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education only shares whether students were eligible for federal free or reduced-price meals, or not. This survey broke things down further.

**OVER 2/3 OF ALL STUDENTS ATE SCHOOL MEALS 3 OR MORE DAYS A WEEK.**

In the lowest income families, those eligible for federally subsidized meals and those just above the eligibility, 79% had students who ate school meals 3 or more days a week.

## School Meals for All reduces feelings of stigma.

Stigma has long been recognized as a barrier to participation, even for families eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Of the students newly eating school meals in October 2022, compared to October 2019, nearly 30,000 were students already eligible for free school meals.<sup>3</sup> In other words, meals were already free for them. It was the social environment around school meals that changed.

**42% OF LOW-INCOME FAMILIES REPORTED THEIR CHILD WOULD BE LESS LIKELY TO EAT SCHOOL MEALS IF THEY WERE NOT FREE FOR ALL STUDENTS.**

Among all families, 94% shared that they would be embarrassed for their child to eat school meals if universal free meals were to end.

## School Meals for All improves food security.

Among those families just above the income threshold for free or reduced-price meals, 61% reported that if school meals were not free for all students, their family would struggle to have enough to eat.

## School Meals for All saves money and time.

Families can save up to \$1,200 per student per year when school meals are free.<sup>4</sup> Households are feeling this impact with 83% reporting that School Meals for All saves them time and money that can then be used to support their family's needs.

## Families of all incomes support School Meals for All.

Across all levels of income surveyed, 84% of families said school meals should be free for all students.

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**School Meals for All has been a clear benefit to the families of Massachusetts.** As the Massachusetts Legislature advances its Fiscal Year 2024 budget and evaluates stand alone pieces of Legislation, we believe this additional research should be taken into consideration and School Meals for All should become permanent in Massachusetts.

<sup>1</sup> Gundersen, C., Strayer, M., Dewey, A., Hake, M., & Engelhard, E. (2021). Map the Meal Gap 2019: An Analysis of County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Glasmeier, Amy K. Living Wage Calculator. 2023. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. <https://livingwage.mit.edu>

<sup>3</sup> Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2022). School Meal Participation Data October 2019 and October 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Fol O, Waxman E, Gundersen C. Does SNAP Cover the Cost of a Meal in Your County? | Urban Institute. Published 2021. <https://www.urban.org/does-snap-cover-cost-meal-your-county>