

Policy Brief

Universal Free School Meals

Protecting Our Investment in Public Education

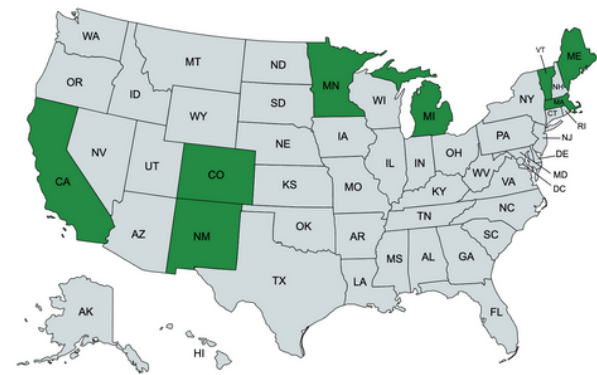
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Background

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provides meals to over 28 million students daily and is a powerful strategy to reduce childhood food insecurity and improve diet quality. The standard “means-tested” approach to pricing provides meals to low-income students at a reduced price or no cost. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, federal regulations were temporarily changed to allow districts to provide free school meals to all students (i.e., Universal Free School Meals, UFSM), regardless of income.

CURRENT STATE OF SCHOOL MEALS

- Since the federal funding for UFSM ended, eight states have passed legislation to continue to offer free school meals to public school students: California, Colorado, New Mexico, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, and Vermont.
- Connecticut provides meals at no cost for students who qualify for reduced-price meals (effectively removing the reduced-price category).
- However, Connecticut has not passed legislation to provide UFSM.



States with UFSM as of November 2024

BENEFITS OF SCHOOL MEALS ^[1]

The Rudd Center is part a national team of researchers that has been comparing school meal participation rates, and experiences of students, parents, and food service directors, in states with and without UFSM policies. Our work clearly shows that UFSM policies:

**increase
participation in
the school
lunch program**



**reduce stigma
related to
participation**



**reduce
administrative
burden**



**reduce student
food
insufficiency**



Further, research suggests that:

- On average, school meals provide the **most nutritious foods that a student eats** during the day.^[ii] This is because school meals are held to nutritional standards based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- UFSM policies are associated with **increased attendance and fewer suspensions.**^[iii]
- Parents are widely supportive of the program, with many reporting that free school meals **help families save money and time** during the school year.^[iv]



Making the Switch to Universal Free School Meals

In Connecticut, a family of four must have an income below \$57,720 in order to meet the federal criteria for a reduced-price lunch (and therefore receive a free lunch under Connecticut's current policy); however, the United Way of Connecticut estimates that a family of four needs to earn \$126,018 to cover housing, food costs, and other essentials.^[v] There is large population of Connecticut families who do not meet the criteria for free meals, but are still struggling to afford healthy meals for their children. These families will benefit from their children receiving healthy meals every day at school.

Conclusion

We collectively pay for public education because we believe that it is our responsibility to our youth – but it's hard to focus in class when you are hungry. In addition to the health benefits of reducing food insecurity and improving diet quality, UFSM protects our investment in the public education of Connecticut's children.

Providing Healthy School Meals for All in Connecticut is a 'win' for students, parents, and schools!

Learn more about the Rudd Center's research on school meals:

uconnruddcenter.org/school-meals



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