

Hunger in Ohio remains unacceptably high. One in six children, and as many as one in four children in certain counties, lives in a household that faces hunger—that’s 413,000 kids across Ohio.ⁱ Yet more than one in three kids that live in a food insecure household doesn’t qualify for school meals.

Well-nourished kids learn better. School meals are just as important to students’ academic success as textbooks. School meals are essential to ensuring that students have access to nutritious food, which has been proven to help children succeed in school.ⁱⁱ School meals are linked to better educational outcomes, including increased test scores, improved academic attendance, and increased graduation rates.ⁱⁱⁱ

Well-nourished kids are healthier. Research links participation in school meals to positive educational and health outcomes for children. School meals support nutrition throughout the entire school day. Those students who participate in the program and access school meals are less likely to have nutrient inadequacies and more likely to consume fruits, vegetables, and milk at breakfast and lunch.^{iv v} Similar benefits are observed among students attending schools that provide breakfast at no cost to all students, when compared to students who eat away from school or through a traditional means-tested breakfast program.^{vi vii} Studying school lunch, researchers conclude “school lunches provide superior nutrient quality than lunches obtained from other sources, particularly for low-income children.”^{viii} Other studies comparing school lunches to packed lunches brought from home or elsewhere similarly conclude that school lunches are more nutrient dense.^{ix x}

Healthy School Meals for All eliminates school meal debt and significantly reduces the administrative work required to operate the School Nutrition Programs and improves school nutrition finances.

Healthy School Meals for All increases participation in school breakfast and lunch, which allows school nutrition finances to benefit from economies of scale. The average cost to schools for producing breakfast and lunch has been shown to decrease with higher participation, with the impact being more significant for school breakfast.^{xi} Currently, nutrition services providers are alarmed by the high amounts of school meal debt they are seeing in their districts. To get a snapshot of the rising levels of school meal debt, a representative sample of Ohio districts were identified. Researchers contacted the

School Meal Debt Snapshot		
School District	Debt Total (as of Dec. or January of this school year)	Debt Total (2019 school year)
Westerville City Schools (Franklin County)	\$40,000	\$5,000
Minford Local School (Scioto County)	\$13,771.15	Data not available due to system update
Delaware City Schools (Delaware County)	\$8,693.78	\$365.00
Washington Local Schools (Lucas County)	\$38,000	\$20,000
Alexander Local School District (Athens County)	\$7,000.00 (would be \$12,000, but recently received a \$5,000 donation)	\$3,200
North Ridgeville City School District (Lorain County)	\$14,040.94	\$2,297.65
Wellington Exempted School District (Lorain County)	\$4,108.58	\$1,085.00

These higher-than-normal levels of school meal debt indicate the urgency and need of Ohio’s families and children.

nutrition services department to identify school meal debt levels and past meal debt totals. Excluded from the representative sample are districts that participate in the Community Eligibility Provision, which allows them to serve school meals to all students at no cost.

Healthy School Meals for All reduces the stigma associated with participating in school meals, which keeps children who need school meals from participating. In early 2019, over 27 million children were certified for free and more than 2.6 million were certified for reduced-price school meals. Yet millions of children — estimates are as high as 1 in 3 eligible students^{xii} — who could receive a free school breakfast or lunch do not participate. The program inherently labels and puts kids into categories. The stigma felt by students that the program is only for low-income kids causes many children not to participate.^{xiii}

Ohio does not have an Anti-Lunch Shaming Law.



The school meal debt collection practices are determined by the district. Unfortunately, this means that in some Ohio Districts, a student (as early as Kindergarten) may be denied access to a hot meal if they accumulate a certain threshold of school meal debt (this can be as low as accumulating the debt of 3 lunches). That child is then handed a peanut butter or cheese sandwich and denied the same school meal of their peers.

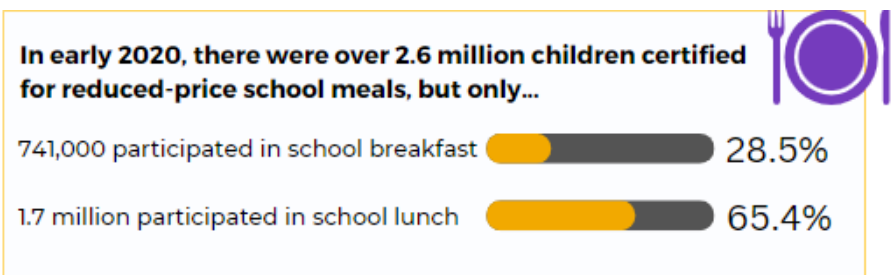
Multiple States Have Taken Decisive Action on Student Hunger. Maine, California, Nevada, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Colorado have passed legislation to ensure that all students have access to school meals for at least this school year. Three states (Maine, California, and Colorado) have passed legislation to permanently provide school meals to all students. Several other states have active legislation to provide school meals to all students at no charge.

Offering Free Meals to Only Some Children Leaves Many Behind

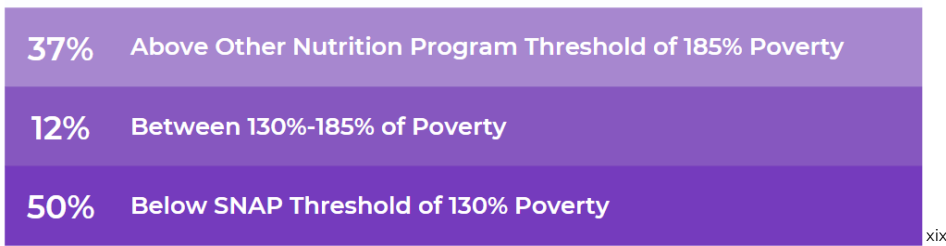
Children are certified to receive free school meals if their household's income is at or below 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. This equates to an annual income of less than \$35,000 for a family of four for the 2021–2022 school year.^{xiv}

Yet, the livable salary for a family of four in Ohio is around \$72,000.^{xv} This means many families struggling to pay for their basic family needs do not qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. And many families who may be eligible for reduced-price meals still struggle to afford the copays, as seen through lower participation rates. The \$0.30 copay for breakfast and the \$0.40 copay for lunch that a student who is certified to receive reduced-price school meals is required to pay can impact participation.

In early 2020, there were over 2.6 million children certified for reduced-price school meals,^{xvi} but only 741,000 participated in school breakfast;^{xvii} and 1.7 million participated in school lunch.^{xviii}



Estimated Program Eligibility - Among People Experiencing Food Insecurity in Ohio



- Households are eligible for free school meals at 130% of the federal poverty level (for a family of 4 = \$36,075 or less) ^{xx}
- Households are eligible for reduced-price meals at 185% of federal poverty level (for a family of 4 = \$36,076 - \$51,338)

Ohio Parents Rely on and Support Broader Access to School Meals

In a survey of Ohio parents and caregivers with students in K-12 schools in Ohio: **87% of respondents agreed that school meals should be provided at no cost to all students**, regardless of the student's ability to pay. And 82% of Ohio parents and caregivers agreed that school meals are helpful for their families.

Ohio Parents Want Hunger-Free Schools for All

More than 8 in 10 Ohio parents and caregivers agree that school meals should be provided at no cost to all students.



Increased Access to School Meals Improves Child Wellbeing

- **Increase future potential.** Ensuring kids get healthy food is a critical step on the path out of poverty and into the workforce. When you have stronger, smarter, healthier kids, you have a stronger, smarter, healthier, more economically competitive state. This is good for Ohio.
- **Student Success.** Students who eat breakfast at school attend more days of school, show improvements in test scores, graduate at higher rates, and earn more as adults.^{xxi}
- **Meet the needs of children and working parents.** In listening circles with parents and students from CDF's Freedom School Sites in Ohio, the idea of universal meals emerged as a key issue. Access to school meals take some of the burden off busy parents and families and helps ease the stress on working families.

-
- ⁱ Gundersen, C., Strayer, M., Dewey, A., Hake, M., & Engelhard, E. (2022). Map the Meal Gap 2022: An Analysis of County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2020. Feeding America. Food insecurity refers to the USDA's measure of lack of access, at times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members and limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods. Food insecure children are defined as children living in households experiencing food insecurity.
- ⁱⁱ Florence, M. D., Asbridge, M., & Veugelers, P. J. (2008). Diet quality and academic performance. *Journal of School Health*, 78(4), 209-215.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Vaisman, N., Voet, H., Akivis, A., & Vakil, E., (1996). Effects of Breakfast Timing on Cognitive Functions of Elementary School Students. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/8859144/>. See also Ptomey, L. T., Steger, F. L., Schubert, M. M., Lee, J., Willis, E. A., Sullivan, D. K., Szabo-Reed, A. N., Washburn, R. A., & Donnelly, J. E. (2016). Breakfast intake and composition is associated with superior academic achievement in elementary schoolchildren. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26697955/>. See also Frisvold, D. E. (2015). Nutrition and cognitive achievement: an evaluation of the School Breakfast Program. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047272714002497>. See Also Murphy, J. M. (2007). Breakfast and learning: an updated review. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228638584_Breakfast_and_Learning_An_Updated_Review. See also Basch, C. E. (2011). Breakfast and the achievement gap among urban minority youth. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21923876/>. Accessed on June 15, 2021.
- ^{iv} Clark, M. A., & Fox, M. K. (2009). Nutritional quality of the diets of U.S. public school children and the role of the school meal programs. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 109(2 Supplement 1), S44–S56.
- ^v Condon, E. M., Crepinsek, M. K., & Fox, M. K. (2009). School meals: types of foods offered to and consumed by children at lunch and breakfast. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 109(2 Supplement 1), S67–S78.
- ^{vi} Crepinsek, M. K., Singh, A., Bernstein, L. S., & McLaughlin, J. E. (2006). Dietary effects of universal-free school breakfast: finding from the evaluation of the School Breakfast Program Pilot Project. *Journal American Dietetic Association*, 106(11), 1796–1803.
- ^{vii} Polonsky, H. M., Davey, A., Bauer, K. W., Foster, G. D., Sherman, S., Abel, M. L., Dale, L. C., & Fisher, J. O. (2018). Breakfast quality varies by location among low-income ethnically diverse children in public urban schools. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 50(2), 190–197
- ^{viii} Vernarelli, J. A., & O'Brien, B. (2017). A vote for school lunches: school lunches provide superior nutrient quality than lunches obtained from other sources in a nationally representative sample of US children. *Nutrients*, 9(9), E924.
- ^{ix} Farris, A. R., Misyak, S., Duffey, K. J., Davis, G. C., Hosig, K., Atzaba-Poria, N., McFerren, M. M., & Serrano, E. L. (2014). Nutritional comparison of packed and school lunches in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children following the implementation of the 2012–2013 National School Lunch Program standards. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 46(6), 621–626
- ^x Hubbard, K. L., Must, A., Eliasziw, M., Folta, S. C., & Goldberg, J. (2014). What's in children's backpacks: foods brought from home. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 114(9), 1424–1431.
- ^{xi} Ollinger, M., & Guthrie, J. (2015). Economies of Scale, the Lunch-Breakfast Ratio, and the Cost of USDA School Breakfasts and Lunches. Available at: https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/45438/54356_err-196_summary.pdf?v=6815. Accessed on December 17, 2023.
- ^{xii} Brown, A., & Bilski, J. (2017). Fighting the stigma of free lunch: Why universal free school lunch is good for students, schools, and families. Available at: <https://www.fordfoundation.org/just-matters/just-matters/posts/fighting-the-stigma-of-free-lunch-why-universal-free-school-lunch-is-good-for-students-schools-and-families/>. Accessed on January 18, 2023.
- ^{xiii} Poppendieck J. (2010). Free for All: Fixing School Food in America. Available at: <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520269880/free-for-all>. Accessed on January 9, 2023.
- ^{xiv} U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. (2021). Child Nutrition Programs: Income Eligibility Guidelines. Available at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2021-03-04/pdf/2021-04452.pdf>. Accessed on December 11, 2023.
- ^{xv} [Living Wage Calculator - Living Wage Calculation for Ohio \(mit.edu\)](#)
- ^{xvi} Certification data reported to the U.S. Department of Agriculture by state child nutrition agencies. Data include all 50 states and the District of Columbia. 20 Food Research & Action Center. (2021).

^{xvii} Food Research & Action Center. (2021). School Breakfast Scorecard School Year 2019–2020. February 2021. Available at: https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/FRAC_BreakfastScorecard_2021.pdf.

^{xviii} 1 U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2021). National Level Annual Summary Tables: FY 1969–2020 (preliminary data for Fiscal Year 2019). National School Lunch Program: Participation and Lunches Served. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/slsummar-6.pdf>. Accessed on June 13, 2021.

^{xix} <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2018/overall/Ohio>

^{xx} Source: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/fr-021622>

^{xxi} Vaisman, N., Voet, H., Akivis, A., & Vakil, E., (1996). Effects of Breakfast Timing on Cognitive Functions of Elementary School Students. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/8859144/>. *See also* Ptomey, L. T., Steger, F. L., Schubert, M. M., Lee, J., Willis, E. A., Sullivan, D. K., Szabo-Reed, A. N., Washburn, R. A., & Donnelly, J. E. (2016). Breakfast intake and composition is associated with superior academic achievement in elementary schoolchildren. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26697955/>. *See also* Frisvold, D. E. (2015). Nutrition and cognitive achievement: an evaluation of the School Breakfast Program. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047272714002497>. *See Also* Murphy, J. M. (2007). Breakfast and learning: an updated review. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228638584_Breakfast_and_Learning_An_Updated_Review. *See also* Basch, C. E. (2011). Breakfast and the achievement gap among urban minority youth. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21923876/>. Accessed on June 15, 2021.