

Hungry kids can't learn.

IT'S TIME TO FUND HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL

to ensure that more Illinois schools are hunger-free,
and support our kids to grow, learn, and thrive.

HB 2365 / SB 1419



Can't parents just pack lunch?

Some parents can, but not all families have the money, resources or time to prepare a hardy breakfast or pack a healthy meal every day. Many work long hours, deal with food insecurity, or rely on convenience foods that may not be nourishing. Free school meals also help level the playing field so that every child, no matter their background, has access to a healthy meal at school. When only certain kids receive free meals, it can cause embarrassment or stigma, which may lead some to skip meals altogether. A universal free breakfast and lunch program removes that barrier and treats every child the same, creating a more inclusive and supportive school environment.

How does this impact learning?

Kids spend most of their day at school, so it's important they're focused on learning. Hunger has a direct impact on a child's ability to concentrate, stay alert, and absorb information. Students who come to school hungry are more likely to struggle with focus, behavior, and academic performance. Providing free, nutritious meals helps ensure that all students have the energy and mental clarity they need to fully participate in class and reach their potential.

Wouldn't implementing this be a burden on schools?

It's actually the opposite! Schools report that universal meal programs reduce their administrative burden. Without the need to process applications, track payments, or chase down meal debt, staff can focus more on serving students. Additionally, schools may experience other budget impacts in the years ahead due to actions by the federal government, so funding this program can help free up funds to be used elsewhere.

How are actions at the federal level impacting school lunches?

Recent changes in federal regulations will make SNAP benefits and Medicaid harder to access and reduce the number of students automatically eligible for free school meals. That could jeopardize adoption and existing programs in many schools, increase paperwork for families and districts, and ultimately reduce access to free meals for many students.

How much is it going to cost?

We propose a modest increase to \$67 million in FY26, which would cover schools with at least 40% of students from families with low incomes. Supporting all Illinois schools to provide free meals to all students and maximizing federal funds would cost around \$216.5 million annually. By ramping up investment in school meals, we can maximize federal reimbursement while controlling the fiscal impact.

Didn't we already pass this?

In 2023, the General Assembly passed, and the Governor signed into law, the Healthy School Meals for All program (Public Act 103-0532), which reimburses schools that provide all students with free, healthy meals. **However, although the law authorizes free meals for all, the state has not yet allocated sufficient funding to make it a reality across all school districts. Illinois currently funds school lunches at \$9 million, which is the bare minimum of what is federally required.**

How does funding for school meals work?

School meals in the United States are partially funded by the federal government through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program. Schools that participate in the NSLP get money (called reimbursements) for each meal they serve to students. The amount of reimbursement a school receives depends on whether the meal was free to the student, reduced price, or full price. States and school districts are expected to make up the difference between the reimbursement and the cost and many do so by charging families directly. State funding would reduce this burden on families and schools, and allow for more families to qualify for this assistance.

Why Now?

Now is a critical time to fund universal free school meals because food insecurity is rising due to increasing living costs, making reliable access to nutritious meals more urgent than ever. Reductions in SNAP and Medicaid eligibility will have significant impacts on families' ability to access school meals, and investing now can help mitigate the fallout. Making free meals a reality for more Illinois families is a long-term investment in children's health, education, and economic futures.

QUESTIONS?

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