Letter to the editor: Why All Students Should Be Eligible For Free School Lunch

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More than 9 million children faced hunger in 2021. That’s 1 in 8 kids at risk for hunger” (Child hunger, n.d.). Throughout development, kids who miss meals are consistently more likely to repeat a grade in elementary school, experience developmental impairments with language and motor skills, and have more social and behavioral problems (Child hunger, n.d.) Children spend most of their waking time at school.

Thus, the eating behaviors of children are largely dependent on the quality and availability of food at schools, in addition to the scheduling of meal times. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program(SBP) are federally-funded programs meant to address malnourished children in the United States. While seemingly sufficient to meet the needs of our nation's children, these programs are failing to address many key issues that may prevent the appropriate and intended distribution of free and reduced meals. These key issues include negative stigma associated with social support programs, difficulty with filling out eligibility forms and other administrative problems, and/or positioning above federal income cut-off points persisting experiences of food insecurity because of extenuating circumstances (Cohen et. al., 2022).

Creating a universal free meal program (UFM) in the United States' public schools would reduce the stigma and administrative burden associated with participation in the existing school meals program. UFM programs increase access to healthy food for all children, including working families right above the income requirements who may struggle to meet basic needs (Martinelli et al., 2022).

Additionally, expanding the current meal programs to better address food insecurity and hunger could decrease later healthcare costs related to poor nutrition, improve education outcomes, and eventually workforce productivity (Ashbrook, 2023). A nationwide UFM program would provide a broader and more equitable approach to addressing food access, filling not only gaps created by the pandemic, but those that clearly existed prior to it as well. School lunch and breakfast are both critical to the health and well-being of students, especially for those that are low-income (Martinelli et al., 2022).

The research shows that free breakfast and lunch ensures that students have the nutrients they need to learn throughout the day, and that receiving free lunch at school reduces food insecurity, obesity rates, and poor health. School meal nutrition standards also have a positive impact on student food selection and consumption—especially for fruits and vegetables (Ashbrook, 2023).

Several countries already successfully instituted a nationwide universal school meal program, but the United States also provided universal school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 to June 2022 due to the rapid increase in food insecurity during that time (Cohen et. al., 2022). However, the universally free meals provided by the federal government ceased starting this school year (2022-2023). Only five states have taken the steps to continue free school meals for all students through this school year as well: Vermont, Massachusetts, California, Nevada, and Maine (Cohen et. al., 2022). The primary reason for replacing increased restrictions on NSLP and SBP requirements after the COVID-19 pandemic are financial, and it is true that universal provision of free breakfast and lunch is a costly endeavor. However, the cost of re-

implementing the eligibility requirements for the NSLP and the SBP from the COVID-19 pandemic pales in comparison to the cost of malnutrition on our communities, the United States healthcare system, and the economy.

A study by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (2019) estimated that $50 billion of the United States yearly healthcare costs are attributable to a diet-related condition (Americans. 2019). These conditions reduce a person's likelihood of working, and those who do work are less likely to work full-time and as productively as their peers without chronic disease. The economic implications of nutrition-related chronic disease are primarily reduced wages, higher employment costs, and reduced government revenue.

This analysis estimates the economic cost of the four nutrition-related chronic diseases among 18 to 64-year-olds at $16 trillion from 2011-2020 (or nearly 9 percent of gross domestic product annually) after accounting for direct healthcare costs, lost productivity, and lost wages (Americans, 2019). So, while expanding eligibility for the NSLP and SBP is a significant initial investment, the reduced stress on the healthcare system from better nutrition in communities, improved learning outcomes, and a more productive workforce are all appreciable benefits.

Overall, expanding the federally funded school-based programs aimed at improving nutritional behavior in children and adolescents is a practical and cost-effective intervention to promote healthier behaviors and lifestyles for students (Ober, 2021). The expansions of these programs also prioritizes the needs of low-income children and families in the United States who face barriers in attaining reliable, consistent meals. Improving the accessibility of school breakfast and lunch could positively affect the way that students approach eating and nutrition for the rest of their lives. Expanding the NSLP and SBP could improve educational outcomes and behavior in children, as well as lightening the burden of poor nutrition on the healthcare delivery system and expanding the productive workforce by preventing nutrition-related diseases.

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