

# Universal Free Breakfast Helps School-Aged Children Succeed



Each day, families struggle with food security and the ability to provide their children with healthy meals that fuel their minds and bodies. Lack of nutrient-rich food impacts child development, overall health outcomes, mental and behavioral health and academic achievement, performance, and participation.

Free school breakfast has been one initiative provided to Pennsylvania school-aged children to combat child hunger and ensure students succeed.

**Unfortunately, the program is not guaranteed to continue in the 2023-24 school year.**

As schools implemented in-home instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, students no longer could rely on receiving meals in their public schools. To support families in combating hunger challenges, the

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) implemented universal free meals, allowing schools to offer free meals to all students, regardless of family income. Waivers were issued so families could receive multiple meals from schools at once, and requirements for students to eat in the cafeteria were lifted. Expiring in the 2021-22 school year, this left states to create individualized policies or resume pre-pandemic protocols for identifying qualifying students.

Pennsylvania continued the universal free breakfast program effective October 1, 2022, allowing students to access free breakfast regardless of income guidelines. Using the School Food Services General Fund appropriation from the prior year, \$21.5 million supported students for the 2022-23 school year. However, this is expiring.

Free school breakfast benefits students by:

- Increasing access to nutritious meals and building healthy eating habits.
- Improving academic performance, including concentration, memory, comprehension, and learning, while reducing hunger-related behavioral problems.
- Reducing the stigma associated with students who access free or reduced meals compared to their peers.

Governor Shapiro has included universal free breakfast and expanded free lunch in his 2023-24 state budget proposal. Post-pandemic, many families continue to struggle financially. Food insecurity is a significant problem—especially with inflation impacting the cost of groceries. ***Student participation in the free breakfast program has doubled compared to before the pandemic.*** There is considerable evidence of the vital role that school meals play in alleviating poverty, supporting good nutrition, advancing learning, and improving overall health.

In the 2023-24 state budget, policymakers should support an investment of \$61.5 million for the School Food Services Program to include:

- \$51 million to expand free school breakfast for all students and to cover the costs for all students receiving reduced lunch; and
- \$10.5 million to continue the current program.

**No child should go hungry, and no parent should worry about feeding their child. Policymakers can ensure that no school-aged child goes hungry by supporting and investing in the Pennsylvania free school breakfast program and expanded school lunch program in the 2023-24 state budget.**



PENNSYLVANIA  
**PARTNERSHIPS**  
FOR CHILDREN  
A VOICE FOR KIDS SINCE 1992

200 North Third Street, 13th Floor  
Harrisburg, PA 17101-1589

717-236-5680 | [www.ppartnerships.org](http://www.ppartnerships.org)