

April 27, 2021

The Honorable James P. McGovern
U.S. House of Representatives
370 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-2102

Dear Congressman McGovern:

On behalf of the 3 million members of the National Education Association, who teach, support, and nurture students in 14,000 communities across America, we submit these comments about the importance of providing healthy school meals to all students, at no charge to them, for the record for your April 28 hearing on ending hunger in America. During the pandemic, Congress and USDA have effectively created a short-term universal school meals program to meet unprecedented levels of hunger. We know that unacceptable levels of food insecurity existed prior to this crisis, and will persist long after. By making healthy school meals universal, free, and permanent, we can go far in addressing childhood hunger, and so much more.

Universal school meals would accomplish the following:

Support learning and improve health.

Ensuring that all students—no matter what their family income is or where they live—receive fresh, healthy school breakfast and lunch will help energize and prepare them for school, regardless of whether they are learning in person or remotely. The research bears this out. Students who participate in school breakfast programs attend school more regularly, behave better, perform better in the classroom, and achieve more in school, according to the [Food Research & Action Center](#) (FRAC).

Not only do school meals support student achievement; additional studies have found that students are eating healthier school meals than ever before. A [study published recently by JAMA Open Network](#) found that the nutritional quality of school food surpasses the nutritional quality of food students get elsewhere—and the quality of school meals greatly increased following passage of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. Healthy school meals place students on the path toward developing lifelong healthy eating habits that could generate long-term health care savings for our nation.

End the shame and stigma that students often associate with free school meals and lead to higher participation in the program.

Many students need a nutritious breakfast and lunch at school but do not participate in the program because they are embarrassed, especially as they get older and become more aware of their circumstances relative to other students. In fact, although 30 million students qualified for free or reduced-price meals in 2019, on an average school day, only 21.8 million participated in the school lunch program, and only 12.5 million ate school breakfast, according to FRAC. Universal school meals for all students would eliminate any stigma around the program, and therefore encourage participation.

Universal school meals would also reduce the “lunch shaming” that results from local district policies

that single students out for accumulated unpaid meal charges. Some districts take meals away from these students, or replace them with sandwiches or other alternatives that make the students' circumstances painfully obvious.

Help schools save money and reduce the paperwork required to certify recipients.

Healthy school meals for all students would lift the burden of unpaid meal debt from schools, and relieve them of complicated and burdensome paperwork required to certify students. We also know that many students actually need school meals but may not qualify for them. Universal school meals would enable food service workers to spend more time on preparing and serving healthy meals, and less time on doing the paperwork necessary to make sure students qualify to receive meals.

Universal school meals would also result in an overall cost savings to schools due to economies of scale: Meals actually cost schools *less* per student when *more* students participate in the program, according to a study by the [Milken Institute of Public Health](#) at George Washington University.

Finally, America—the wealthiest nation in the world—should not means-test children for food. We can do better. The pandemic brought into sharp focus the depth of food insecurity in the United States, and it also demonstrated that our nation's food service workers have been valiant in their dedication to providing meals to students in all communities, even under the most challenging circumstances. We must build on this knowledge and provide all students with healthy school meals at no charge to them, building a solid foundation for growth and learning, cultivating lifelong healthy eating habits, and dramatically reducing childhood hunger.

Sincerely,

Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations
National Education Association