

## **Free School Lunches for all Students**

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Imagine going to school everyday with the fear of being hungry? "McConnell, the Senate minority leader, is "forcefully opposing" a provision to extend the federal school lunch waivers as part of an omnibus government funding package".(Johnson, 2022) I understand why people want to get rid of free lunches because nothing is free, the money has to come from somewhere. However, I believe that all children should have the opportunity to receive free school lunches despite their parents' financial status.

Many believe that it is the parents' responsibility to feed their children, not the taxpayers, or the schools. "Mitch McConnell never needed free lunch to get a hot meal at school. He never needed food stamps to survive," Charles Booker, a Democratic U.S. Senate candidate in Kentucky, wrote in response to the GOP leader's obstruction, "Nearly half of Kentucky's children live in households below 200% of the federal poverty line. I was one of them. He doesn't see us." (Johnson, 2022) However all children should be able to eat school lunch for free in addition to not going hungry. I was one of these students growing up; I didn't ever really know we were poor, because my parents did a good job of hiding the fact. We received free lunches which I am glad we did because I do not know what we would have done without this option. My parents had five children and did not make much money, so the option of free school lunches was a great resource and helped us feel like we were the same as everyone else. I remember one time I had detention for chewing gum in class and I was only able to have a sandwich on a bun and some celery and carrots. This made me feel ashamed and embarrassed that I wasn't eating what the rest of the kids were eating so I made sure to never get detention again. Children are not the ones that should suffer from hunger because of their parents' financial status. According to Linda Quin in 2023, "All schools participating in our nation's school meals programs may serve free

meals to all students for the upcoming school year, not just to those qualifying via family income.” (Qui 2023)

“School meals are often the difference between whether or not children have enough to eat on any given day, particularly for those who may not have enough food at home”. (Qui, 2023) “School meal programs play a crucial role in ensuring children are fed and have access to food, but they also have their problems. Students who qualify for free school lunches often receive different meals than the rest of the students or are forced to stand in different lines, which can be embarrassing and lead to bullying”.(Qui,2023) An example of this is when I worked at the school in the lunchroom and if students did not have lunch money in their account they would get a white milk and bread with a slice of cheese. Kids would cry when this was all they were offered. A lot of the time the students would not eat at all because of being embarrassed and kids would ridicule them for being poor. It makes me sad to think some kids not only can’t afford to eat but are then ridiculed for being poor. I again was one of five kids and my mom did not work, so we were not high on financial status. My family was on wic and food stamps from time to time. My mom always made due with what we had and we never really knew when we were struggling. I struggled with anxiety and would have been mortified to have not had lunch or had to eat only a bread and cheese sandwich.

With free school lunches from the pandemic coming to an end, some kids will go back to not having lunch at school. School lunches ending has people worried kids will end up going hungry. “Free school lunches for all set to end, creating ‘perfect storm’ amid high inflation”, says Elizabeth Chuck (Chuch,2022) School meals are very important to some kids, this could be the difference between them eating or going hungry, especially for the kids who do not have food at home. While working in the lunchroom I often saw kids not eating or just eating one item. Some

kids just sit with their head down in hunger and sadness. I would often find them something to eat, or pay for them to eat or just say that someone spilled their tray so I could get another tray of food for someone who didn't have any food to eat. Working the lunchroom was fun most of the time but when kids were hungry it was a tough job. I felt like I wasn't doing my job as a supervisor, by not giving those children food. The children looked to me for food and support, they did not understand why they cannot eat. As a parent of three kids and an employee at a primary school I strongly agree that all schools should offer free breakfasts and lunches to all students.

Every child needs to eat; no child should go hungry due to circumstances against their control. That is why we have universal free lunch programs, but with any program there are some issues along with the benefits. Universal free school lunches would level the playing field for all students. Every child would have the same opportunity for lunch so there would be no discrimination or embarrassment. This program also fights childhood hunger, free lunches would drastically reduce this problem. Giving free, healthy lunches to all children will improve health and education outcomes for a generations to come. While there are a lot of benefits to the universal school lunch program there are also some issues too. Like the quality of food in school lunches is not always great. School budgets keep the quality of food in the lunchroom low. Food waste will continue to rise with every child receiving lunch and kids not liking all food. While I worked in the lunchroom, I saw so much food waste. Kids would take a few bites and a drink of their milk and throw the rest of their tray of food away. We couldn't save anything, even if it was in pre-packaged portions. The school made the kids take a fruit, veggie, and the main course and most kids would eat the main part of the meal but throw everything else away, which was generally the most healthy part of the meal. The school I worked at had a program for a while

where they worked with a local pig farm and the waste food went to the farm for the pigs to eat. So we had to separate the garbage from the food waste, and milk waste. This worked for a while but then it became a liability because if the pigs got sick or died due to eating something apart from food the school would be at fault. So now the waste would be on the rise.

"We don't ask children to pay for a ride on the bus. We don't ask them to pay for a lot of things, and a meal should be one of the things that they can count on." (Cummings, 2023) A lot of parents make "just enough" to qualify for the free lunch program, so what would these families do without this option. A parent during the pandemic said, "When the kids had free lunch during the pandemic, that was such a relief off my shoulders and they had such good food," (Cummings, 2023) Families should not go broke trying to give their kids school lunches or be indebted to the school for their kids receiving lunches. When I was young and my parents couldn't afford lunches we were thankful for the government run lunch program based on my parents' income. I benefited from this program and my school ran it so no one knew you were on a program rather than paying for lunches. I would have gone hungry without this program so I am thankful for this and I would vote to raise taxes to help insure all kids had the same opportunity to eat lunch every day. "What would you rather we spend our tax money on?" "We have a moral imperative as a society to take care of our most vulnerable community members and sometimes that shows up as a carton of chocolate milk, 14 baby carrots and a grilled cheese sandwich," says a seventh grade teacher. (Cummings, 2023)

Children should have the opportunity to eat lunch at school everyday even if their parents can not afford it. By offering free lunches to all students in public school this would improve the problem. Coming from a child who needed to use a government funded school lunch program, this is a great program and helps kids feel normal, and keeps them from embarrassment and

ridicule. Without this program I do not know if I would have had lunch every day at school. I am lucky to have not had to go hungry at school. I hope every child is given this opportunity to receive free school lunches from this day forward.

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