

A Pathway to Universal Free Meals for All Kansas Children: The State of School Meals in Kansas

School meals are one of the most important tools in the fight against childhood hunger and ensuring future student success. Students who participate in school meals benefit from:

- Improved health outcomes,
- Better test scores,
- Fewer school absences,
- Less behavioral referrals.¹

However, many children who depend on school meals are unable to receive them due to barriers like cost and limited eligibility for meal-assistance programs.

In Kansas, many kids experiencing hunger and food insecurity are not able to access critical programs that provide much needed nutritious meals and ease the financial burden for their families. In particular, this report found:

- School meal programs are critical to Kansas kids' educational success and overall well-being, especially with childhood hunger rapidly increasing. In Kansas, 1 in 5 children do not know where their next meal is coming from. Over 130,000 children in the state face food insecurity.²
- Families who are barely making ends meet are most impacted by meal costs for their children.
- Despite the need, schools and families cannot always take advantage of the programs in place to help fill the gap that pandemic-era Child Nutrition Program flexibilities left in the state.
- There may be children in Kansas who qualify for free or reduced price meals, but are not receiving them.
- Schools and districts in Kansas are also not always taking advantage of federal programs that could expand access to free meals for kids in high-poverty areas. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a federal program that districts must elect to adopt. It provides free meals to all students in any school in the district with a 25% or more identified student percent (ISP).
- The State of Kansas, school districts, community members and advocates can take measures to ensure more Kansas kids receive school meals at no cost. These include:
 - Eliminating co-pay for reduced-priced meals for all Kansas students.
 - Creating a school meals application outreach campaign.
 - Conducting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) outreach in schools.
 - Implementing best practices for charging and collecting meal debt when meal debt occurs.

- Encouraging adoption of CEP participation through state legislation.
- Supporting schools that do not qualify for full reimbursement in CEP by appropriating funds to make up the difference between the cost and federal reimbursement. To reduce the financial burden for those schools that do not qualify for full reimbursement in CEP, the legislature could appropriate funds to make up the difference between cost and federal reimbursement.
- Ultimately, Kansas could follow the lead of the eight other states currently offering no-cost meals to children by giving all Kansas kids access to free school meals regardless of their economic background, through initiatives such as a Healthy School Meals for All (HSMFA) campaign.

Background

Currently, schools can offer free or reduced-price meals to their students through federal programs. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulates state administration of child nutrition programs (CNPs), including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP).³ The Federal guidelines require that states provide school meals at reduced or free rates to students who meet certain financial requirements.⁴ The USDA's Food and Nutrition Services department frequently evaluates current recommendations for healthy eating and sets nutrition standards for CNPs through rulemaking processes.⁵ Schools that choose to participate in programs such as the free and reduced lunch program are reimbursed with federal funds.⁶

Starting March 2020 and through the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, universal free school meals was a federal COVID-19 initiative that proved public policy is an integral step to reducing hunger and eliminating barriers. No matter their household income, all students had access to nutritious meals to support their learning and development at school. When the federal universal school meal program ended in June 2022, parents found themselves once again having to pack lunches or keep a balance in their child's account.

School districts and parents are struggling to provide nutritious meals to children in the face of higher grocery prices, increasing costs of housing and utilities, and the end of universal meals. Districts have cited unpaid meal debt as one of the top challenges they face with the end of universal meals. Additionally, increasing costs, staffing shortages, and supply chain issues have put a significant burden on school administrators and their budgets.⁷ On average, it currently costs more to produce a school meal than districts are charging or being reimbursed.⁸ This is likely to be an even larger challenge for districts now that increased federal reimbursements for school meals have expired.⁹ Persistent meal debt paired with increased costs and decreased federal reimbursement has left school districts' meal service budgets in a precarious financial position, hindering schools' ability to provide meal access.

However, not all districts and states have decided to forgo universal meals. In total eight states—California, Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, Colorado, Minnesota, Michigan, and New Mexico—have passed legislation to make school meals available to all students at no cost,

regardless of family income. Research shows that school lunch and breakfast participation increased in most of those states. Some states reported increases in lunch participation of up to 24% and increases in breakfast participation of up to 40%. Further, child nutrition agencies in these states report that their universal meal policies have reduced childhood hunger, made things easier for parents, eliminated stigma, eased administrative work, supported academic achievement, and improved racial equity.¹⁰

Kansas has not enacted policies that could ensure thousands of Kansas children have access to healthy meals. Doing so would ease the economic burdens many Kansas families are currently grappling with and reduce childhood hunger in all corners of the state. There are policy actions Kansas policymakers can take to achieve a Kansas where all school children have access to healthy school meals and parents do not have to make difficult decisions about how to afford to feed their children.

The problem

School meal programs are critical to Kansas children’s educational success and overall well-being, especially with childhood hunger rapidly increasing. In Kansas, 1 in 5 children do not know where their next meal is coming from. Over 130,000 children in the state face food insecurity.¹¹ School meals are one of the most effective ways to give students from low-income households guaranteed access to food. School meals provide children one-third or more of their recommended daily nutritional needs, and are linked with improved academic performance.¹² Additionally, for many children, the meal(s) they receive in school may be the most nutritious meal(s) they eat in a day.¹³ One study found that two-thirds of students who participate in the NSLP come from households that are not receiving any other food assistance through programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, making free school meals an especially important program for families living paycheck to paycheck.¹⁴

During the 2020 and 2021 school years, Kansas children and school districts benefited from universal meals. At that time, all of the state's 480,000 students had access to healthy school meals, increasing access to free school meals by about 65%.¹⁵ Universal free school meals in the state provided much-needed relief to families struggling to make ends meet in the face of an unprecedented crisis. However, without that relief, children are going hungry. Since access to free meals for all students has ended, childhood hunger in the state has increased by 40%.¹⁶

Families who are barely making ends meet are most impacted by meal costs for their children. In the 2023-2024 school year, 42% of Kansas students received free meals. These students have all of their meal costs subsidized through reimbursements at no cost to the families. However, families approved for reduced-price meals still need to pay a portion of school meals. These are families who face daily struggles to afford food, rent, gas, etc. but do not meet the federal level to qualify for free meals, which would entirely ease the financial stress of making sure their kids are not going hungry in school.

In addition, poverty persists even outside of federal guidelines. In Kansas, for the 2023-24 school year, a family of four must make less than \$39,000 per year in order to qualify for free meals, and less than \$55,500 to qualify for reduced-price meals.¹⁷ The percent of Kansas students receiving reduced meals has decreased from 10% to 7% from before the pandemic to the 2023-24 school year.¹⁸ This could indicate that federal income guidelines are insufficient in truly addressing poverty, and that there are many Kansas families who need support but do not currently qualify for free or reduced-priced meals. For example, according to cost of living research, a family of four (two working parents and two children) needs a combined income of over \$98,000 (before taxes) to live comfortably in Kansas.¹⁹

Families who make slightly more than free or reduced guidelines do not qualify for school meal assistance of any kind. Yet, they face the same barriers as the families who do qualify for assistance. During the pandemic, wages rose and may have pushed some families just over the threshold of qualifying for meal assistance. The USDA adjusts their limits for inflation, but with rising food, gas, and housing costs, families' food budgets are stressed. That already stressed budget has the additional strain of free meals ending and districts raising meal prices to keep up with their own rising costs.²⁰

Kansans are working hard, but still struggling. Twelve percent of households live below the federal poverty level. However, another 27% of households do not earn enough to afford their basic needs such as housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and taxes. These are Kansans with jobs. They are employed as truckers, retail workers, customer service representatives, nurses, cooks, personal care aides, and more.²¹ That means 447,000 Kansan households who work hard every day are struggling to make ends meet and are making difficult decisions about how to provide for their family's needs.²² Free meals for their children at school could make a significant difference in their budgets.

Universal free meals guarantee much-needed help to these Kansans—the ones who do not qualify for the school meal programs. The average cost of a lunch in Kansas schools for the upcoming school year (2024-25) is \$2.91. That means, universal free meals for a family with four children who don't meet federal eligibility requirements for free or reduced meals could save up to \$2,165 a year on lunches for their children. Breakfasts for that same family would save an additional \$1,360 a year.²³ When a family is barely making enough to get by, any savings in other areas of their budget can be used to pay other necessary expenses while not having to worry about their children going hungry.

Despite the need, schools and families cannot always take advantage of the programs in place to help fill the gap that universal free meals have left in the state. For a family to qualify for free meals the household must have an income at or below 130% of the federal poverty level. For a family to qualify for reduced-priced meals the household must have an income between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty level.²⁴ Families submit an application with information about their income and the number of people in the household to their district. Some students qualify for free meals through a process called direct certification. This means that certain students automatically qualify for free meals based on their participation in another

program. In Kansas, those are students who are in foster care, receive TANF, receive SNAP, or some who receive Medicaid.²⁵

Participation in free and reduced-priced meals in Kansas schools has remained relatively steady in recent years, despite the increase in childhood food insecurity in the state since the end of universal free meals. In the 2023-24 school year, 42% of Kansas students were approved for free lunch and 7% for reduced-priced meals. In total almost half of all Kansas students were eligible for free or reduced-priced meals. Before and during the initial years of the COVID pandemic, the number of kids eligible for free meals was slightly lower (37%) and reduced eligibility was slightly higher (10%).²⁶ These numbers could indicate that the number of families on the edge of poverty and food insecurity—the reduced-priced eligible households—have decreased in recent years. Still, childhood food insecurity in Kansas has increased by almost 40% since the end of universal free meals in schools under the COVID provisions.²⁷ Further for most of the last 2 years, wages have increased, but not enough to keep up with rising inflation.²⁸ Free meals are needed now more than ever.

The number of kids eligible for free or reduced-priced meals in Kansas may exceed the number actually certified as eligible. One study found that between 16 and 25 percent of potentially eligible families do not apply for school meal benefits. Applied to Kansas, that means an additional 18,762 to 29,316 households with children in Kansas may potentially be eligible for school meal program benefits.²⁹

There are a number of reasons why potentially eligible families do not apply for meal programs:

- The burden of an application that asks for information such as family members in the household and income can be cumbersome and time consuming, especially for working or single parents.
- Parents with limited English or reading skills may find the application difficult to fill out and submit.
- Family pride and fear of being ridiculed for seeking food assistance for their children.
- Many parents in immigrant communities are afraid to apply for food assistance programs due to fear of public consequences and identification.³⁰

Universal free meals would eliminate these barriers for Kansas families and ensure the children and families currently not accessing free or reduced priced meals could do so without fear or hardship.

Schools and districts in Kansas are also not always taking advantage of federal programs that could expand access to free meals for kids in high-poverty areas. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a federal program that districts must elect to adopt. Beginning this school year, CEP provides free meals to all students in any school, group of schools, or school district with a 25% (40% prior to this year) or more identified student percent (ISP). The ISP is calculated through the percent of children eligible for free school meals through direct certification. That means students in Kansas who receive TANF, SNAP, and

certain Medicaid programs are counted and the percent of the student body they make up determines the school's ISP.

However, CEP is not a financially viable option for all schools that qualify. The ISP of the district determines federal reimbursements to schools that qualify for CEP (25% ISP or higher). To calculate reimbursement, the school's ISP is multiplied by 1.6, meaning a school that has a 50% ISP would be reimbursed by the federal government for 80% of the meals they serve at the federal free rate, with the remaining 20% of meals served reimbursed at the lower federal paid rate. This means any district with an ISP under 62.5% will not be fully reimbursed for the meals they serve and would have to pay the difference in cost. Therefore, even though districts or schools can qualify with ISP rates as low as 25%, without changes to the federal reimbursement rate, it is not feasible for all qualifying schools or districts to elect to participate in the program.³¹

Kansas has seen a substantial increase in the number of schools and districts electing to use CEP to provide free meals to their students. In the 2022-23 school year only 34 schools – 7% of eligible sites in the state elected to use CEP. In the 2023-24 school year, the number of sites electing to use CEP increased to 31% of eligible sites (158 schools). This increase means that the number of students at eligible or potentially eligible sites with access to free meals increased from 4% to 42%.³² In the 2024-25 school year the number of school sites electing to participate in CEP continued to increase with 177 eligible sites electing to participate, a 12% increase from the previous year.³³

Policy changes contributed to more students having access to universal free meals for all through CEP. In the 2022-23 school year, Kansas joined the USDA's Direct Certification with Medicaid pilot. This pilot essentially added Medicaid as a category for direct certification. This not only increased the number of children who automatically qualified for free meals, but it also increased schools' ISP numbers. The higher ISP numbers allowed more schools to be eligible for CEP and also allowed for higher reimbursement rates from the federal government should they elect to participate in CEP. CEP became a fiscally sound decision for many schools.³⁴

Still, more Kansas schools are eligible for CEP and are not using it. Only 42% of all eligible students in Kansas receive free meals through CEP despite the majority of Kansas schools qualifying for the CEP program. The average ISP for those schools that elected to participate in the 2023-24 school year was 57%. Only two districts had an ISP that qualified them for complete federal reimbursement at their schools, although their individual schools that chose to adopt CEP may have had full reimbursement ISPs. An additional six districts had ISPs that put them close to full reimbursement (58% to 62%).³⁵ The average ISP for schools that elected for CEP in the 2024-25 school year is 86%, indicating that ISPs are trending upwards. Of the 177 schools that elected to use CEP in the 2024-25 school year, 159 (89%) had ISP that qualified them for full federal reimbursement of meals served.³⁶

Notably, there are a number of districts and schools that would qualify for CEP that elected not to adopt it:

- All of Wichita’s 88 schools are eligible for CEP based on their ISP. Further, 58 of the districts’ schools are eligible for full federal reimbursement. Still, none of the district’s schools have adopted CEP in the 2023-24 school year. Wichita is the state’s largest district, with 46,414 students enrolled in the 2023-24 school year. Wichita’s election of CEP would double the amount of children in the state who have access to free meals through CEP.
- Another 60 schools in the state have ISPs between 40 and 62.5 percent, but didn’t elect to participate during the 2023-24 school year. Those schools would receive federal free reimbursements for 64% to 99% of the meals they serve.³⁷

In 2023-24, up to 357,000 Kansas children may be eligible for free meals through the CEP program, but their schools have not elected to enroll in the program. For many school districts with lower eligible ISPs, it is not financially feasible at current federal reimbursement rates to adopt the program. However, if the schools that were eligible for full reimbursement and those close to full reimbursement (ISPs between 50% and above) adopted CEP, an additional 106,633 Kansas children would have access to free school meals.

Call to Action

There are steps Kansas legislators, school administrators, school boards, community leaders and advocates can take to help ensure the 130,000 kids facing food insecurity in Kansas have access to meals, while also alleviating the financial burden working Kansas families face everyday as they navigate making ends meet for their families.

The State of Kansas and school districts can take measures to ensure more Kansas kids receive school meals at no cost. These include:

- *Eliminating co-pay for reduced-priced meals for all Kansas students.* School districts where CEP is not viable can eliminate families’ co-pay for reduced-priced meals. Additionally, this could be implemented as a statewide effort. The USDA allows states and districts to subsidize the family’s portion of the reduced-priced meals so students who qualify for reduced-priced meals would receive meals free of charge.

Fifteen other states (Arkansas, Colorado, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington) and Washington DC currently have laws subsidizing reduced-price meals.³⁸ Subsidizing reduced-priced meals would cost the state about \$4 to \$7 million per year.³⁹ That would be less than half a percent increase in state funding to education.

Covering the cost of reduced-priced meals for all eligible kids in the state would increase the number of children with access to free meals by 17 to 24%.⁴⁰

- *Subsidizing reduced-priced meals can be done at the district level, too.* Last year, Emporia Public Schools eliminated the copay for reduced-priced meals.⁴¹

Other ways advocates, administrators, and state officials can ensure that all Kansas children have access to food during the school day include interventions to make sure all students in need are receiving the support they need, include:

- *Creating a school meals application outreach campaign.* Free and reduced-price meal applications are critical to ensuring students from low-income households have access to school meals. Breaking down barriers families face to applying for those programs is crucial to getting meals for children in need. Further, these applications help boost state and federal funding to schools for both meals for those children and educational programs to support their learning through at-risk funding.
- *Conducting SNAP Food Assistance outreach in schools.* For families struggling to make ends meet, free meals at schools paired with SNAP food assistance allows them to stretch their budgets even further. School districts can work to ensure more families are aware that SNAP food assistance is available to them. Not only is this valuable to families, it also allows districts to leverage direct certification for school meals, as well as boosts a school or school districts ISP for CEP participation.
- *Implement best practices for charging and collecting meal debt when meal debt occurs.* For example, continue to ensure the child with meal debt receives a full meal, do not use outside collection agencies, and never publicly shame the child or use them to communicate information about meal debt to parents. These best practices make certain that no matter the financial situation of the family, the child does not suffer from shame and is not denied a much-needed meal.⁴²

Community Eligibility Provision is a promising solution for Kansas schools because it can be implemented in a number of ways to maximize flexibility for school districts.

Steps that can be taken at the local level to take full advantage of the program include:

- *CEP can be implemented district-wide, in specific eligible schools or, in groupings.*
 - For example: A very high ISP school can be grouped with low ISP schools in a district to maximize benefit for more students.
- *Districts can make sure all students eligible for direct certification are accounted for.* Accuracy in that number maximizes ISP in the school and ultimately reduces the burden of implementing CEP for districts.
- *Advocates and experts can also provide more support to work one-on-one with districts who could implement CEP but currently have not.* Tailored support, outreach, and policy advocacy would support CEP expansion at the local level.
 - For example, Wichita’s school district has a significant number of children who would benefit from CEP at no cost, yet the school has not implemented CEP. Advocates should work with the district to understand barriers and how to remove them so all students eligible for free meals through CEP can receive them.
- *Districts and schools who have ISPs above 55% can adopt CEP with minimal cost.* Districts at 55% ISP are reimbursed for 88% of the meals served at the federal free rate. That reimbursement increases as the ISP does.
- *Pair CEP with Breakfast After the Bell.* Serving breakfast after the start of the school day and allowing children to consume breakfast in their homeroom or first period class, increases participation in the School Breakfast Program and strengthens the financial

viability of school food service departments. Pairing CEP with Breakfast After the Bell strategies is a proven strategy to eliminate stigma, decrease morning hunger, and strengthen the financial health of school food service departments.⁴³

The state of Kansas can also take measures to ensure more Kansas kids receive school meals at no cost through CEP. These include:

- The state legislature can incentivize participation among eligible schools across the state. For example, providing subsidies to support CEP implementation.
- Since schools qualify for CEP with a 25% ISP, which only receives a 40% reimbursement rate under current federal rules, the legislature could choose to direct CEP participation at other ISP levels above 25% as well. For example, the legislature could have all schools with a 50% ISP (80% federal reimbursement under CEP) to elect to use CEP.
- To reduce the financial burden for those schools that do not qualify for full reimbursement, the legislature could appropriate funds to subsidize the difference between cost and federal reimbursement.

The cost to districts and the state under any of these policies would vary based on a number of factors. Additional cost study work and models should be part of this advocacy work.

Ultimately, Kansas could offer no-cost meals to children by giving all Kansas kids access to free school meals regardless of their economic background, through initiatives such as a Healthy School Meals for All (HSMFA) campaign.

- This would benefit families, children, and districts by reducing food stigma, ending school meal debt, removing administrative burdens, and enhancing academic performance.
- This is a relatively low-cost solution to ensure all Kansas kids have access to meals during the school day, with estimated costs of \$278 million to \$305 million.⁴⁴

All Kansas children should thrive and the state has the means to make policy decisions to ensure they do.



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