

SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL SAVES

\$152 MILLION ANNUALLY



Massachusetts benefits from School Meals for All, according to a new estimate of savings related to direct medical costs and productivity annually among adults.

For over 75 years, the National School Lunch Program has provided access to meals to millions of students each year. Particularly after improved nutrition standards in 2012, these meals have been a critical source of nutrition improving health and education outcomes for participating students. In 2011, the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) allowed more students to participate by enabling schools and districts with a high percentage of low-income students to provide universal free meals to all students. Since March 2020, Massachusetts has extended access to meals to all students offering not only immediate and long-term advantages to students, administrative savings to schools, and financial support to families, but also a significant savings in healthcare costs in the Commonwealth. New research from Tufts University finds that continuing a School Meals for All policy can save Massachusetts \$152 million in direct medical costs and productivity annually among adults.

Findings of New Research

When expanding the current school meal program to a universal free school meal program, the research estimates that the percentage of children eating school breakfast each day in non-CEP schools increased from 11.5% to 22.1%, and for school lunch increased from 50.8% to 64.5%. Compared to the current school meal program, expansion to a universal free school meal program would be associated with \$152 million in cost savings from direct medical costs and productivity annually in Massachusetts when these children become adults. In other words, habits developed by eating school meals reduce future costs related to cancer, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes.

FAQS

What is the Important Role of School Meals in Solving Childhood Hunger?

School meals are a critical source of nutrition for many children, helping them learn and be active in the short term, and thrive academically, physically, and emotionally in the long term. School meals establish lifelong healthy eating habits that can reduce the cases and severity of diabetes, heart disease, and obesity, along with the cost associated with these diseases. School meals can account for over half of a child's daily calories. These are children who might not otherwise have reliable access to healthy food at home. But right now, more than half of students who could benefit from school meals aren't eating them. While there are many reasons for this, two of the biggest barriers that stop children from participating in school meals are the cost of purchasing meals and the stigma of being singled out as needing a school meal.



Impact on Policy

As the federal funding for School Meals for All ended, the state of Massachusetts has invested \$175 million in state funding to continue this policy during the 2022-2023 school year. Currently, the Massachusetts House of Representatives has proposed making this program permanent as part of the Fiscal Year 2024 state budget. While lawmakers decide, the numerous benefits to education, health, and household economic well-being should be weighed as well as this new research.

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Methods and Research Partners

Data for the study comes from two sources (1) the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) (2013-2018) and (2) Massachusetts school meal participation data (March 2019 and March 2022). Data from the NHANES provided information on dietary habits and health risks of Massachusetts adults allowing us to estimate the potential long-term health and economic benefits of universal school meals in Massachusetts. School meal participation data came from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and provided information on the average daily school meal participation and Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) status.



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