

## Testimony on S.100, 3/10/22

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Increasing evidence suggests that the quality of one's diet can impact academic achievement and school attendance, as well as long-life income and health. This is astonishing, not in itself, but because we as a society are often hesitant to make relatively simple changes that can better assure availability of good nutrition for our children, when it matters most. Food insecurity, or anything else that impacts one's ability to access and consume healthy food, can lead to malnutrition and obesity. This leaves the individual with a vulnerability to non-communicable diseases (cardiovascular disease and diabetes) and puts them at risk for more serious outcomes from illnesses such as COVID-19. In fact, death from nutrition-related diseases is starting to overtake death from tobacco-related diseases in the US.

Providing children who are at-risk because of their families' financial situation with access to better nutrition through the National School Lunch Program was a fantastic start. However, we learned lessons: despite widespread access to the NSLP, many eligible low-income students (from 16% in elementary schools to 36% in high schools) did not participate for many reasons (parents' inability or unwillingness to fill out the paperwork, stigma and bullying in the cafeteria, etc). Lessons learned during the pandemic, when school meals were available to all, have yet to be totally quantified.

And remember – being “poor” is only one reason for poor nutrition! Parents with incomes that wouldn't qualify them for the NSLP may not be providing healthy breakfast and lunches for a variety of reasons: poor knowledge of nutrition, convenience of fast foods, competing household budget needs at certain times, poor organization skills, and more serious issues, such as mental illness, substance use, and separation/divorce.

Better nutrition through universal access to school meals for children previously not benefiting from them could improve a child's health, wellbeing and academic performance, as well as reduce socio-economic disparities in education and health.

Recent data from 2 studies looking at schools with universal free meals (UFM): (one across several states, one looking at NYC)

- improved school meal participation
- improved attendance (modest but important). School absenteeism is an important predictor of student achievement, high school and college graduation rates, adult income, and health. Even modest improvements are important!
- improved academic achievement (mixed results for math/reading, based on certain factors)
  - NYC study: increases in school lunch participation improve academic performance for both poor and non-poor students
- reduced out-of-school suspension and expulsion rates
- reduced BMI and obesity among children from low-income families
  - NYC study: no evidence that UFM increases the probability that students are obese or overweight. Instead, evidence that participation in school lunch improves weight outcomes for non-poor students
- NYC study: on-time grade promotion rates, disciplinary referrals, and food security.
- Potential co-benefits of improved school meal participation need further documentation

- effects on household food security,
- family and school finances.

Two final points:

Food is Medicine

- Nutrition is integral to people flourishing and to the treatment and management of diseases that threaten us. One should not have to face the dual crises of illness and hunger. We know that without access to nourishment that meets the needs of the particular person, taking into account their illness, allergies, medications and personal needs, we will fail to create health in our society. By making medically tailored nutrition and food central to our healthcare system we will produce better health outcomes, lower the cost of care and improve patient satisfaction.

Effect of Food on Mood/Mental Health

- We are learning more about how a healthy diet has a positive effect on mood, and how diets high in refined sugars, fat and salt can have a negative effect
- If you are worried about where your next meal is coming from, and you are feeling very hungry, it is difficult to concentrate and focus on anything else. You will be anxious, irritable, and have a harder time controlling your emotions.

References:

Rudd Center for Food Policy : [Universal School Meals in the US: What Can We Learn from the Community Eligibility Provision?](#)

**Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance**  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22175>

FRAC (Food Research & Action Center): [Case for school meals for all](#) and [Top 10 Reasons to Support Universal School Meals](#)

### **Food Research & Action Center: Top 10 Reasons to Support Universal School Meals!**

In this guest blog post, Dr. Janet Poppendieck, Urban School Food Alliance Advisory Council Member, highlights 10 key reasons to support free healthy school meals for all. Professor Poppendieck is the author of *Free For All: Fixing School Food in America* (University of California Press, 2010).

1. **Reduce childhood hunger and food insecurity.** An alarming increase in food insecurity among children has been reported during the COVID-19 pandemic. Healthy school meals should be available to all students, including those who may be in need but are not financially eligible under the current rules. — a common occurrence in parts of the nation where the cost of living is high. Providing free meals to all eliminates the inaccuracies in application and certification that have resulted in some eligible children being denied free or reduced-price meals, and it encourages participation.

2. **End school food stigma.** When school meals are perceived as “welfare food,” or “poor kids’ meals,” some students in need decline to participate, preferring to go hungry, and those who do participate consume a meal tainted by shame. The stigma derived from the income-based classification of students quickly transfers to the food itself, leading to perceptions that it is inferior, even when the items served are the very same ones that students are purchasing from the corner store.
3. **Terminate “lunch shaming.”** Ironically, efforts to reduce the stigma associated with free and reduced-price meals have created a new type of shaming. As school systems have converted to electronic systems using swipe cards or finger imaging to mask the distinction between the children who are paying the school meals fees and those who are not, the problem of “low balance” or unpaid lunch bills has led to public shaming of students in efforts to collect money from parents. Some schools stamp children’s hands with a message to parents: “I need lunch money.” Some take trays away from children when they reach the cashier, giving students an inexpensive replacement meal widely known as a “stigma sandwich.”
4. **Eliminate lunch debt.** Meanwhile, unpaid lunch bills total hundreds of thousands of dollars annually that must be written off by school food operators, reducing the resources available for food, staff, and equipment and thus the quality of the meals offered. Further, owing lunch money deters parents from participating in school activities such as parent-teacher conferences and exhibit nights.
5. **Remove a significant administrative burden.** Distributing and collecting applications for free and reduced-price meals, certifying students for the proper school meals fee categories based on parental income, verifying a subset of applications to comply with federal requirements, and assigning and reporting each meal served to the correct reimbursement category are complex processes that absorb the time of principals and teachers as well as school food service staff, time that could be better spent on education.
6. **Improve the meals.** As participation increases, the unit cost of producing each meal goes down. By removing barriers to participation and eliminating unpaid meal debt, healthy school meals for all will increase the resources available for food and labor, resulting in better, fresher, more appealing food — and thus further increasing participation. As more students participate, more parents and students will have a reason to get involved in efforts to improve menus and meal quality.
7. **Speed up the lines, give students more time to eat.** Studies show that when students are pressed for time to eat, they reach for sweets and carbohydrates first, and often forgo the healthiest foods on their plates. With everyone entitled to meals, schools can experiment with innovative approaches to the lunch hour such as serving meals during club meetings and specialized activities.
8. **Promote student health.** School meals are designed to meet nutrition standards and promote healthy eating. In a nation in which diet-related diseases are rampant, food education is widely recognized as a crucial contributor to health. A school in which all students are invited to the table can improve student health outcomes in the present through healthy meals, and in the future by integrating school food with the curriculum.

9. **Enhance learning and academic achievement.** Students who eat do better than students who miss meals. Students who consume healthy foods do better than students who pick up a bag of chips and a soda at the corner store. Students in schools with healthy meals for all fared better on tests than their peers in schools without universal in a carefully controlled study by the Maxwell School at Syracuse University.
10. **Foster social solidarity, reduce bullying, promote cohesion.** Think of meals at summer camp — a time for relaxation, socialization, and joy. Once the stigma of the association with poverty is removed, school lunchrooms can become the hospitable places that they were always intended to be.