

## Summary of Key Findings: Universal School Meals Research Studies

### Student Mental Health & Wellbeing

A study by the National Institutes of Health found that universal school meals improved students' mental health, reducing instances of both anxiety and depression, and reducing visits to the school nurse.

[“Diet, Breakfast, and Academic Performance in Children,”](#) National Institutes of Health, 2002

A study of the relationship between universal school meals and student behavior found declines in both suspension rates and disruptive classroom behavior.

[“School Nutrition and Student Discipline: Effect of Schoolwide Free Meals,”](#) National Bureau of Economic Research, 2018

Rates of hunger and food insecurity remain very high right now in Vermont, with families with children more likely to be food insecure, according to the [UVM NFACT research team's 2024 findings](#)). The [Food Research and Action Center has compiled the findings](#) from multiple studies of the relationship between child hunger, universal school meals, and mental health in children and teens:

- Food insecurity is strongly correlated to higher levels of anxiety and irritability among children.
- As the severity of household food insecurity increases, so does the likelihood that children and adolescents will develop a mental disorder.
- Teens experiencing hunger are more likely to have difficulty getting along with peers, get suspended from school, see a psychologist, have suicidal tendencies, and struggle with depression, as compared to their food-secure peers.
- When food insecurity worsens for a teenager, the risk of developing a mood disorder, such as depression or bipolar disorder, increases.

A study conducted by the Center for Policy Research in New York City schools in 2019 found that:

- “Universal school meals improve performance in both reading and math, while targeted educational interventions typically improve performance in only one subject.”
- Universal school meals improve performance in both math and English language arts by up to 10 weeks of learning.
- The test scores of students who were not eligible for free or reduced-price school meals improved the most.
- The probability of obesity was reduced for students who were not eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. A [JAMA-Pediatrics](#) (2023) study confirmed that universal school meals reduced obesity for all groups of students.

[“Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance,”](#) Center for Policy Research, 2019

## Attendance

A study in the [Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](#) (2020) found that universal school meals improved attendance for economically disadvantaged students in the second year of implementation and beyond, reducing the percentage of economically disadvantaged students with low attendance by 3.5%. A study by researchers at [Syracuse University](#) (2023) found that universal school meals improved chronic absenteeism in kindergarten by 5.4%, and increased attendance for the youngest students. These attendance benefits continue as students move to higher elementary school grades.

A study conducted by University of Vermont Researchers and published in 2020 found that universal school meals was associated with:

- Improved readiness to learn among students overall
- Improved overall school social climate as a result of financial difference being less visible
- Declines in financial and emotional stress for parents and students
- Declines in stress for school administrators related to the need to collect school meal program debts from families
- Increased ability of schools to purchase and serve local food

[“Universal Free School Meal Programs in Vermont Show Multi-Domain Benefits,” Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition, 2020](#)

A systematic review of 47 research studies on universal school meals in the United States and other developed countries found that:

- Universal school meals significantly increases overall student participation in school meal programs.
- Universal school meals improves academic performance, both by increasing school attendance, and by improving the quality of childrens’ diets.
- Universal school meals improves overall diet quality for all students, and does not increase body mass index (BMI).
- Universal school meals improves overall family food security for low income households.

[“Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review,” Nutrients, 2021](#)

A study conducted in Vermont by the Urban Institute in 2019 found that:

- 25% of eligible students were not eating free school lunch, and more than 50% of eligible students were not eating free school breakfast.
- Stigma and shame regarding applying for and using the school meal program was a significant barrier keeping eligible children from accessing school meals. Implementing universal school meals would minimize stigma in two ways: by eliminating the application process for families, and by allowing all students to have access to the same healthy meals at school.
- In addition, up to 42% of children living in food insecure homes in Vermont were not eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

[“Evidence-Based Strategies to End Childhood Hunger in Vermont,” The Urban Institute, 2019](#)

The USDA commissioned an evaluation of universal school meals in early-adopting states, and found that:

- School districts realized time savings on application verification and administrative tasks of 68 minutes per student per year, a cost savings of \$29 per student per year.
- Student participation increased in both breakfast and lunch.

[Community Eligibility Provision Evaluation](#), Prepared by Abt Associates for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2014