

Healthy School Meals for All

Healthy School Meals for All (also known as Universal Free School Meals) is a policy that ensures all public-school students have access to breakfast and lunch at no cost as part of the school day, regardless of their household income, so they can learn and thrive.

Research shows that *Healthy School Meals for All* policies reduce food insecurity, improve nutrition and academic performance and generate much-needed revenue for school nutrition programs. School meals are an integral part of the school day and should be no different than access to textbooks, technology, busing, and health services that are provided to all students without cost.

Nine states (California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York and Vermont) have permanent Healthy School Meals for All programs with similar legislation introduced in many additional states.



***** IT'S TIME FOR RHODE ISLAND TO ACT *****

Please prioritize our children, families, and schools – support Senate Bill S2663 (Vargas) and House Bill H7793 (Caldwell) that would phase in Healthy School Meals for All over three years starting with elementary schools in the 2027-2028 school year, followed by middle schools in 2028-2029, and high schools in 2029-2030.

Reduces Food Insecurity and Improves Learning



School meals play a critical role in student health, well-being, and academic success. Increasing access to school meals alleviates hunger, supports good nutrition, and positively impacts attendance, behavior, and cognition, particularly in the 40% of RI households with at least one child who are food-insecure. (2025 RI Life Index)

No More Stigma in the Cafeteria



When all students can eat for free without concern for whether a parent/guardian has provided money for meals or completed a qualified meal benefit application, stress and stigma vanish. The children who need meals the most don't feel singled out. All students become equal in the cafe. No child should have to prove they are worthy of nutritious food.

Elimination of Meal Debt



Student meal debt in schools across RI has ballooned following the end of the federal free meal program during the pandemic. School districts must often pay off this debt with general education funds when student unpaid meal accounts aren't cleared. Turning educators into "bill collectors" isn't compatible with building positive and productive relationships between schools and families.

Federal income guidelines for free/reduced-price meals are nowhere near sufficient to meet the needs of struggling families. The meal benefit application process can also be intimidating, confusing, or shameful for some families.

Better Quality Meal Programs



Schools can better invest in food service programs as a result of greater participation with increased reimbursement. New equipment, staffing, local food, and more wholesome scratch cooking can be budgeted. With less of an administrative burden, programs can spend more time on engaging students in menu development, taste tests, and the cafeteria experience.

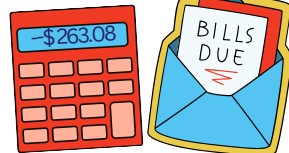
How will Healthy School Meals for All be funded in RI?

Federal funds through meal reimbursements will be maximized through United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs such as the Community Eligibility Program (CEP) and Provision 2. These programs allow schools to claim the highest number of meals and be reimbursed at the Federal “free” rate, based on established need, with zero state contribution. For meals that cannot be reimbursed at the Federal “free” rate, the state will reimburse educational entities the difference between the federal reimbursement rate for students who qualify for free meals and the rate the federal government reimburses for students who are full pay.

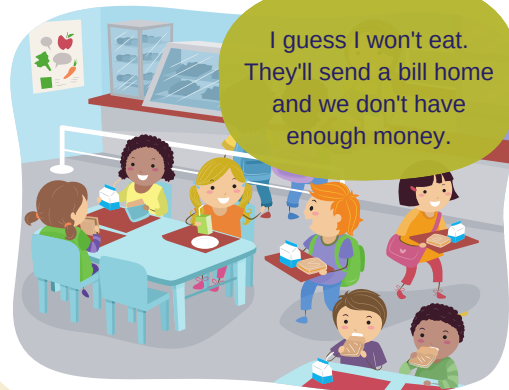


The State Education Aid formula no longer uses meal benefit applications to determine student poverty levels so an HSMA program would have no impact on state education funding.

I'm a single mother. I work full time, but I only make minimum wage. We don't qualify for free or reduced-price meals, but I'm struggling to pay rent and feed my kids healthy food.



I guess I won't eat. They'll send a bill home and we don't have enough money.



I'm sorry, but your children have unpaid balances on their lunch account that need to be paid as soon as possible.



I hope they'll still come to teacher conferences and stay involved in their kids' educations....

With greater participation and revenue, our program could be so much better with more investment in local foods, scratch cooking, new equipment and staff pay and training.



rischoolmeals4all.com

CONTACT:

Megan Tucker, American Heart Association
megan.tucker@heart.org

Mary Barden, National Education Association RI
mbarden@neari.org