Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
PolicyLab

Healthy School Meals for All: Highlighting Nutrition Security Opportunities in 200 Words

Health Equity

Date Posted:

Mar 28, 2023

Nutrition security, or consistent and equitable access to nutritious foods, is ever important. One bright spot on this issue is the growing attention and political support for universal school meals, which provide school breakfast and lunches to all students regardless of income.

In the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) temporarily enabled free school meals for all children. These benefits ended June 30, 2022, and since, several states have committed funds to continue providing school meals for all students, including most recently in Minnesota and New Mexico.

Here in Pennsylvania, the state budget supports school breakfast for all students, while more than 200 school districts provide universal school meals through the USDA's community eligibility provision. Governor Shapiro recently made preserving the state budget line for universal school breakfasts one of his main talking points in presenting his first budget.

There's good evidence to support universal school meals, and the resulting increased student participation in school meal programs can reduce school absenteeism and help address food insecurity. As such, the Community Preventive Services Task Force recommends healthy meals for all children to advance health equity in the United States.

On the heels of reductions in nutrition program benefits and increased food costs, universal school meals offer an opportunity to increase nutrition security and overall well-being for our children. This can be achieved federally through the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act or through this emerging state-level action.

This post is part of our "____ in 200 Words" series. In this series, we tackle issues related to children's health policy and explain and connect you to resources to help understand them further, all in 200 words. If you have any suggestions for a topic in this series, please send a note to PolicyLab's Strategic Operations & Communications Director ***Lauren Walens****.*

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