

Nearly 200,000 Florida students could lose free school lunch under rule changes

The proposal for the food stamps program was first announced in July.

A sign thanking area farmers, from the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, hangs over the kitchen in the cafeteria at Challenger K-8 School during a lunch service on Oct. 15 at the school in Spring Hill during the county's Fresh from Florida Plate Day event. Hernando has the highest percentage of students enrolled in the National School Lunch Program in the Tampa Bay area at 67 percent. [DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD | Tampa Bay Times]

By **Lautaro Grinspan, Miami Herald**

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Nearly 200,000 children across Florida could lose their automatic access to free school lunches under a Trump administration proposal that would limit the number of people enrolled in the federal food stamps program, formally known as SNAP.

The proposal — [first announced in July by the U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) — would restrict SNAP enrollment by taking away states' ability to tweak some income and asset limits for households that receive both food stamps and other welfare benefits.

In Florida, that flexibility had allowed the state's Department of Children and Families to raise the threshold for SNAP qualification, letting households with incomes up to 200 percent of the poverty level receive food stamps — among the highest in the nation.

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Under the stricter eligibility criteria imposed in the Department of Agriculture's proposal, [328,000 Floridians](#), and three million people nationwide, would see their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits end.

Children would be among the hardest hit because SNAP participation also grants them automatic access to free school lunches, a provision that's part of the [National School Lunch Program](#). In Florida, the number of kids that would be subject to losing both their food stamps and their automatic eligibility for free lunches at school stands at 195,888, with some counties affected more than others.

Among the places where the policy change could take a big toll is Miami-Dade, where 71 percent of the student body is enrolled in the National School Lunch Program. That's the fifth-highest percentage in the state, according to [the nonpartisan Florida Policy Institute](#). Locally,

Hernando County has the highest percentage of students enrolled at 67 percent. (Hillsborough has 58 percent; Pinellas, 50 percent; Pasco, 55 percent.)

“Once these SNAP benefits are pulled, it will drastically impact the kids who are accessing free lunches at school, and it will put that much more of a burden on families that are already struggling,” said Paco Vélez, president and CEO of Feeding South Florida, the largest hunger-relief organization in the region. “Parents will have to increase their budget to figure out how they are going to pay for food at home, but they are also going to have to increase their budget to pay for their children’s food at school.”

In October, a new [government analysis](#) of the USDA proposal showed that nearly one million students nationwide would no longer be directly certified for free school meals based on SNAP participation.

But the majority of affected households would still be eligible for free- and reduced-price meals for their kids if they individually file an application for the National School Lunch Program, instead of relying on automatic approval.

According to the Food and Nutrition Service, of the 982,000 children whose households would lose food stamp access, almost half of them would still qualify for free lunch. Eligible families can’t have a household income that surpasses 130 percent of the poverty line (that’s \$33,475 for a family of four), and they must go through a formal application process.

That more time-intensive process to securing free school meals could lead to some kids falling through the cracks, experts say.

“I don’t think it’s unrealistic or crying wolf to say that there are going to be a lot of families who are going to be lost not because they are ineligible, but because of the procedural barriers they’ll encounter when trying to apply,” said Cindy Huddleston, a senior policy analyst at the Florida Policy Institute. “Filing applications, providing verification, having to wait, these are things that create barriers.”

Miami-Dade Schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, agrees. He noted in an August letter to members of Miami-Dade’s congressional delegation that the more “streamlined process” currently in place “improves students’ access to school meals, reduces extra district paperwork and costs, and increases program integrity.”

Huddleston added: “If this cut goes through, I think the burden is going to fall on schools to figure out how they’ll get children and families who lose their SNAP back into the school lunch program as soon as possible. Teachers are also going to have an enormous burden to figure out how to help children who are hungry learn when they aren’t able to get back onto the school lunch program, because there will be a number of kids who will not be able to get back on it at all.”

The latest analysis by the government predicts the SNAP changes could reduce federal school-meal program expenses by roughly \$90 million a year. The Trump administration is pursuing

cost-cutting moves when it comes to nutrition assistance programs to close what it says are “loopholes” in who qualifies.

‘We know that hungry students can’t learn’

Darlene Moppert is the program manager for nutrition education and training at Broward County Public Schools, where 60,000 students across all grade levels are enrolled in free school lunch through SNAP.

She said that the government’s proposed cuts to SNAP are concerning, although all students receiving free lunches will continue to be in the program through the school year.

“We wouldn’t be taking people off the rolls immediately.”

If the proposal happens, school administrators said they would need to increase outreach to make sure families know about the application process.

“We will have to just increase our marketing efforts to make sure that we are reaching those affected families to help them apply for free and reduced price school meals,” Moppert said. “We hope we don’t have to do this.”

The stakes are high, Moppert explained, both in terms of students’ health and educational outcomes.

“We know that hungry students can’t learn,” she said. Schools could also take a funding hit if a smaller share of the student body is enrolled in the National School Lunch Program.

“School meals are funded on a daily per-student, per-meal reimbursement, and a decrease in student meal participation results in a loss in school district revenues,” according to Carvalho.

More work for nonprofits

Back when the proposed SNAP rule was first made public in July, Vélez, the president and CEO of Feeding South Florida, mentioned that hunger in the community is greatest during summertime, when kids miss the free school meals they can count on when school is in session.

Vélez said disrupting access to free school meals risks making those challenging summertime conditions the norm year-round.

“When we talk to families, the children are the ones saying ‘I don’t want to take a Thanksgiving break, I don’t want to take a holiday break or a spring break or even a summer vacation because I’m not going to have anything to eat when I get home,’ ” he said. “And that in and of itself is very, very heartbreaking.”

According to a report released by Feeding South Florida earlier this year, Miami-Dade has the highest percentage of food insecure children in South Florida, with 19.4% of the county's children going to bed hungry.

Vélez is gearing up for a bigger workload in the event the SNAP cuts become reality.

“The nonprofit network in these communities is going to have to step up to fill in an even larger gap for a lot of these families.”