

A Holiday Wishlist for Our Nation's Children

WASHINGTON, December 8, 2022 — A group of national anti-hunger and education nonprofits have teamed up this holiday season to share a joint holiday wish list for fueling the health, learning, and overall well-being of our nation's school children.

One of the key ways to achieve these goals is by providing all children—no matter their household income—with access to free school meals.

Holiday Wish List for our Nation's Children:

- Promote health
- Reduce childhood hunger
- Boost participation in school meals
- Remove stigma from the cafeteria
- Eliminate school meal debt

From March 2020 through the 2021–2022 school year, all schools were permitted to provide free school meals to all students. This ensured access to school meals and supported school meal operations throughout the challenging and difficult circumstances created by the pandemic.

Yet this school year, free school meals returned to a tiered eligibility system that leaves millions of children from struggling households being denied access to free school meals. As a result, there has been an increase in school meal debt and children who are eligible for free school meals are once again experiencing stigma in the cafeteria.

Congress has the opportunity before the end of the year to expand the reach of free school meals to millions more children. By expanding the Community Eligibility Provision, Congress can ensure more schools will be able to provide free meals to all their students.

Join these national partners on Instagram in raising your hand for Healthy School Meals for All on Tuesday, December 13, and urge Congress to expand community eligibility before the end of the year.

“Millions of American families are in financial crisis, struggling to get food on the table so their kids don't go to bed hungry. Congress could make a huge difference by acting immediately to expand free school meals to reach millions more children. Parents across the country have come together, calling on their representatives to act — it's time they listen,” said **Ailen Arreaza, co-director of ParentsTogether Action**.

“Access to healthy food options is critical to a child's well-being and academic success. And for far too many children, school meals are often the most nutritious meals they receive,” said **Anna King, president of National PTA**. “The flexibility that permitted all schools to provide free meals to all students during the pandemic ensured families and educators alike could focus on children's education first and foremost. It is urgent that Congress take action toward serving all students at no cost. Students cannot learn without adequate nutrition, and no child in our nation should have to go hungry.”

“No child should have to learn on an empty belly. Food insecurity can be found in every

community — urban, suburban, and rural — and this crisis is particularly exacerbated in our Black, brown and Indigenous communities. Since the U.S.D.A. universal school meals waivers ended, educators across the country have witnessed an alarming rise in students going hungry,” said **Beck Pringle, president of the National Education Association (NEA)**. “Congress can take a big step towards fixing this crisis by expanding the Community Eligibility Provision before the end of the year to provide free school meals to more children.”

“No child should go hungry, especially when at school,” said **Bruce Lesley, president of the First Focus Campaign for Children**. “Hunger inflicts long-term health and developmental damage on children and makes it harder to excel at school. During the pandemic, free school meals for all children were a success story; the expiration of this policy means millions of children are yet again racking up lunch debt and facing stigma in the cafeteria. Congress has the opportunity to increase access to free school meals for millions of children by expanding the Community Eligibility Provision before the end of the year. We call on lawmakers to act now to ensure no child goes hungry.”

“We wholeheartedly support the expansion of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which would expand the reach of free school meals and allow schools to streamline vital nutrition services, benefiting millions of children nationwide,” said **Cassidy Pont, lead policy advocate of Domestic Child Nutrition for Save the Children**, “That’s why we’re so pleased to be joining our coalition partners in urging Congress to put kids first this holiday season. There’s no better time to act in the interest of children, particularly the millions of children nationwide who go to bed hungry every night. Congress must act. Our children — our future — deserve more.”

“It’s no secret that students need nutritious meals in order to learn and grow. The Community Eligibility Provision and the ability to feed all students for free allows educators to focus on their true mission of ensuring students are career and college ready. Congress has the opportunity to positively impact students, families, and schools across this country by expanding CEP,” said **Dan Domenech, executive director of the School Superintendents Association (AASA)**. “During this season of giving, we hope Congress will find the resources to expand CEP and ensure there are no hungry children in schools next year.”

“CEP allows high-poverty schools to feed all students for free, greatly improves student meal participation, and helps districts operate their food service programs in a more sustainable manner. We urge Congress to invest more in this program—it’s a win-win solution for everyone!” said **David J. Lewis, CEO and executive director of ASBO International**.

“America’s Latino families and immigrant families face unique barriers to their children obtaining free and low-cost school meals. Those barriers include a lack of awareness, application forms that are hard to complete, and past anti-immigration policies that continue to create community fear. At a time when many families continue to struggle with putting food on the table, Congress must pass legislation giving all children in America equitable access to healthy school meals. One important step is to end needless paperwork requirements so children in low-income communities can automatically receive the free school meals they need to learn and grow,” said **Eric Rodriguez, senior vice president of Policy and Advocacy at UnidosUS**.

“Our children deserve nutritious food over the holidays and throughout the year,” said **Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, executive director and CEO of MomsRising**. “Millions of moms and families are living paycheck to paycheck and struggling with the high cost of meals. If lunch and breakfast were again free at school, families would be better able to make ends meet and fewer children would be hungry. Congress should expand community eligibility this month so more children will have access to healthy school meals!”

“Too many families that are struggling to make ends meet don’t quite qualify for free or reduced-price school meals,” said **Lori Adkins, MS, SNS, CHE, president of School Nutrition Association**. “No child should walk into the cafeteria worried about whether her family can afford a school meal. When healthy school meals are available for all children for free, teachers know their students are fueled for success - a gift for students, families and faculty alike.”

“There is no excuse for any child to experience hunger in this country when solutions exist,” said **Luis Guardia, president of the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC)**. “Free healthy school meals for all students during the pandemic were a game changer for children, families, and schools. We can’t turn back now. We need our holiday wish list to come true.”

“Children can get up to half or more of their daily calories at school, and for many, schools are their only consistent source of nutritious meals. Congress must act to ensure all children have access to healthy school meals at little or no cost.” – **Mark Schoeberl, executive vice president of Advocacy, American Heart Association**.

“Our farm to school partners work with children and producers every day to strengthen the health and economic impacts of local food in schools across the nation. But our partners’ innovative programs can’t reach their full potential in a system that stigmatizes kids for school meal participation based on their family’s economic status, or unpaid school meal debt,” said **Miguel Villarreal, interim co-executive director of the National Farm to School Network**. “School meals are an investment in the future and all children should have a right to these meals in a just food system.”

“Seventy-three percent of public school teachers report they are teaching students who come to school hungry. We know that when kids are hungry, they can’t concentrate, lack energy, and often struggle behaviorally and academically. That’s why we urge Congress to include our child nutrition priorities in any end of year spending package. We owe it to our nation’s children,” said **Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)**.

“This time of year, people talk about the challenges facing families impacted by hunger. The truth is, it’s a year-round issue, and we have a tried and tested solution right in front of us,” said **Dr. Robert S. Harvey, president of FoodCorps and a former school superintendent**. “Providing free school meals to all students without stigma or shame supports academic success and emotional wellbeing of kids and families. It also supports school staff by reducing burdensome paperwork and allowing them to focus on what they do best: teaching and feeding students. When we nourish our kids in body, mind, and spirit, we all succeed.”

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The [Food Research & Action Center](#) improves the nutrition, health, and well-being of people struggling against poverty-related hunger in the United States through advocacy, partnerships, and by advancing bold and equitable policy solutions. To learn more, visit [FRAC.org](#) and follow us on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and on [Facebook](#).