

Universal School Meals PA

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Media Contact: Kurt Knaus

P: 717-571-5687 | E: kurt@ceislermedia.com

Shapiro's Budget Scores Failing Grade on School Lunches

Spending plan excludes funding to expand no-cost breakfast to lunch

HARRISBURG (Feb. 6, 2023) – Even though eight in 10 Pennsylvania voters want to expand the state's existing no-cost breakfast to include lunch for students in kindergarten through 12th grade, Gov. Josh Shapiro's proposed 2024-25 budget fails to make the grade. His draft spending plan is absent of any funding or policy to expand the popular initiative.

More than 50 anti-hunger groups, child nutrition programs, school districts, childhood health and education advocates, and other organizations from across the state [sent a letter to the governor](#) in December urging him to fund no-cost school lunches. The state already provides and pays for no-cost school breakfasts.

"It's disheartening," said Melissa Froehlich Green, Public Communications Chair for the School Nutrition Association of Pennsylvania. "None of this diminishes what the governor has already done to make sure students have access to healthy meals. But the time is now for Pennsylvania to do everything in its power to ensure no child goes hungry. As much as we're disappointed by this plan, we remain committed to working with the administration and General Assembly to get the job done."

Other states already recognize the value universal school meals offer in terms of student health and learning. California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Maine, New Mexico and Vermont all offer universal school meals. Several other states have measures pending now to expand breakfast programs to include lunch.

That's because school meals reduce childhood hunger; decrease childhood weight issues and obesity; improve child nutrition and wellness; enhance child development and school readiness; support learning, attendance, and behavior; and contribute to positive mental health outcomes. Moreover, the state's existing school lunch policy, where some students are expected to pay while others receive their meals for free, creates stigma and shame.

"Hungry kids can't learn," said Nicole Melia, School Nutrition Association of Pennsylvania public policy and legislation chair. "The state gives students all the resources they need to succeed in the morning, and school lunch is just as important. School meals are as essential to the education process as technology, transportation, and playgrounds. We need to take care of this basic need for our students as well."

State and federal governments also already pay for and supply things like laptops, textbooks, desks, school supplies, teachers, and playground equipment.

No-cost school lunch is the one thing everyone can agree on. [Based on recent polling by Susquehanna Polling and Research](#), support for the initiative is broad-based and bipartisan among those who identify as Republican (78%), Democrat (86%), and Independent or unaffiliated (82%), and posts strong majorities in all key subgroups, including people who voted for Joe Biden (84%) and Donald Trump (82%) in 2020, as well as self-identified conservatives (81%), moderates (83%), and liberal or progressive voters (84%).

Shapiro has been a champion for school breakfast in the commonwealth, where 1.7 million kids are now offered breakfast and ready to learn. He also enlisted Pennsylvania in a new federal program that provides hundreds of millions of dollars for summer food aid for children.

“Providing school lunch for all has robust support among Pennsylvanians statewide because it is a commonsense policy that prioritizes the well-being of all students,” **said Suzan Neiger Gould, executive director of Manna on Main Street in Lansdale.** “At Manna on Main Street, we are seeing skyrocketing demand for food, with more and more people relying on us for services and support, including families with schoolchildren. Amid rising demand for food in communities across the commonwealth, our General Assembly should continue the forward progress begun with universal school breakfasts and fund universal school lunch, thereby ensuring that no student goes hungry at school in Pennsylvania.”

Even with all these initiatives, one out of every eight kids in Pennsylvania goes hungry, but as many as one in five experience hunger in rural areas. Providing no-cost school lunches often is the only reliable source of food and nutrition for some of these children.

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