

Universal School Meals PA

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Pennsylvanians Want No-Cost Lunches in Schools

New polling finds 8 in 10 voters support expanding no-cost breakfast to include lunch for students in grades K through 12

HARRISBURG (Dec. 6, 2023) – Eight in 10 Pennsylvania voters support expanding the state’s existing no-cost breakfast to include lunch for students in kindergarten through 12th grade, according to the results of a new statewide public opinion poll conducted 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%).

There isn’t a geographic region without strong majorities of support: Northwest (75%), Southwest (85%), the conservative central Pennsylvania “T” section (81%), Northeast (86%), Southcentral (82%), and Southeast with Philadelphia’s collar counties (81%). The proposal also has widespread support among urban (85%), suburban (81%), and rural (87%) voters.

“Rarely do we see an issue in Pennsylvania that unites nearly everyone,” said Melissa Froehlich Green, Public Communications Chair for the School Nutrition Association of Pennsylvania. “Feeding kids is very popular, and Pennsylvanians of all ages and political persuasions, in all parts of the state, want to connect kids to healthy foods to increase their ability to learn and succeed.”

Pennsylvania currently provides no-cost breakfast for all students in schools that participate in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs. When it comes to lunch, however, many students are left on their own.

The existing policy for school lunches, where some children are expected to pay while others receive their meals for free, creates stigma and shame for those students who rely on school meals for their basic needs, and a barrier for those students who are not eligible but still experience food insecurity. Of the food insecure children in Pennsylvania, nearly one in four, or 23%, do not qualify for free or reduced-priced meals. When told about the shame and stigma some students experience, 83% of respondents are “more likely” to support a universal meal program.

“School meals play a critical role in student health and academic success,” said Dani Ruhf, founder and CEO of Child Hunger Outreach Partners. “Offering no-cost breakfast and lunch to every student ensures they have the nutrition they need to grow and thrive.”

The issue resonates especially in rural areas. 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. When poll respondents know these facts, 88% are “more likely” to support expanding no-cost breakfast to include lunch.

Among other findings, 84% are “more likely” to support expanding no-cost breakfast to include lunch when told that local farmers could provide more food for schools and local communities if the program is expanded. Even at a cost of approximately \$300 million annually, 84% support the initiative, knowing that amounts to less than 1% of the state budget.

Research shows healthy meals have a profound effect on student health and learning. School meals reduce childhood hunger; decrease childhood weight issues and obesity and improve child nutrition and wellness; enhance child development and school readiness; support learning, attendance, and behavior; and contribute to positive mental health outcomes.

Even after learning more about some of the common arguments opponents might make against expansion, including cost, voters continue to support universal school lunches by an 83% to 13% margin in favor of the plan, showing virtually no drop off from earlier in the poll when they were told initially about the program’s benefits and advantages.

Sixty-eight percent (68%) of likely voters say they would be “more likely” to vote for a state lawmaker in Harrisburg who supports expanding the program to include both free or no-cost breakfast and lunch for all public school children.

Children in Michigan, Massachusetts, and Minnesota are now eligible to receive free, no-cost meals in school, regardless of their family’s income. Other states that offer universal school meals include Vermont, Colorado, California, Maine, and New Mexico. That’s 15 million kids in eight states. Eighty-one percent (81%) of respondents want Pennsylvania added to the list.

“Our state and federal governments already pay for and supply things like textbooks, desks, supplies, teachers, and playground equipment for public school children, but if kids are hungry, they can’t learn,” Froehlich Green said. “We already provide breakfast. Why one meal and not the other?”

The poll was conducted on behalf of the School Nutrition Association of Pennsylvania’s Universal School Meals PA coalition, a group of anti-hunger and child nutrition organizations that want to streamline and strengthen school nutrition programs and ensure no-cost universal school meals for all students.

The poll interviewed 800 registered and likely voters in Pennsylvania between Nov. 15 and Nov. 26, weighted to state Census data and balanced by geographic region, age, political party affiliation, and other factors with an oversample of Republican respondents. The margin of error is +/-3.4% at the 95% confidence level.

To review the poll in full, visit <https://snapa.org/mealsforall>.

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