



## Universal School Meals Lighten the Load for Families and Food Banks

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Millions of children in the United States struggle with hunger every year. Government food programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and school meal initiatives provide vital support, but charitable organizations often serve as an informal extension of the safety net, stepping in when these government programs leave gaps. For example, food banks play an important role for families who do not qualify for public assistance or whose needs go beyond what formal aid can provide. But what happens when government programs expand? Do they displace the work of nonprofits, or help them better target their efforts? **New research shows** that expanding access to free school meals not only lowers food insecurity, but also eases the burden on food banks and strengthens the overall safety net.

### The Community Eligibility Provision Program

One government food program that has expanded in recent years is the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). CEP is the largest schoolwide free meals initiative in the United States. Launched as a pilot in the 2011–12 school year and rolled out nationally over the next four years, CEP fundamentally changed how school meal programs operate by making free meals available to all students, regardless of income. Despite its promise, only about one-third of eligible schools participated in 2014 through 2018. Even now, participation remains uneven. In the 2023–24 school year, **about one-quarter of eligible districts still had not adopted CEP.**

Because low-income students already qualified for free school meals prior to CEP, the program's most meaningful expansion is for students in low-poverty schools—students who may not qualify for assistance but still have unmet nutritional needs. By analyzing variation in CEP adoption across time and geography, our research team assessed how broader access to free school meals affects the use of charitable food resources.

### Key Findings About Free School Meal Expansion

- Public safety net programs do not compete with nonprofits; they help nonprofits focus more effectively on any unmet needs that remain in the community
- An increase in access to free school meals led to a decline in food bank use while donations and fundraising remained stable
- Free school meals expansion offers a cost-effective path towards fewer hungry students, reduced costs for food banks, and reduced grocery spending for families with children

Expanding access to schoolwide free meals significantly reduces reliance on food banks. Our findings suggest that stronger government programs not only reduce food insecurity directly but also relieve pressure on the charitable sector, especially in communities that have historically been underserved by public assistance. The

largest reductions occurred in low-poverty areas where new access to school meals had the greatest reach. Urban areas, where nonprofit activity is more concentrated and more responsive to changes in economic conditions, showed the strongest reduction in food bank use with expanded free school meals.

## The Financial Benefits of the Community Eligibility Provision Program

From a public finance perspective, the study results show that expanding free school meal access increases federal government spending, but also generates meaningful savings for local governments, food banks, and households. Notably, food donations and fundraising efforts at food banks remained stable, or even increased slightly, despite the drop in usage. This points to a broader motivation for charitable giving, one that goes beyond observable need and includes factors like community connection and the personal satisfaction of giving.

A 10% increase in CEP access raises total government spending on school meals by about \$203 million. Because CEP is federally funded, this increase is entirely borne by the federal government. State spending remains unchanged, while local government expenditures decrease by 12.6%. Meanwhile, the 2018 expense reports from Feeding America, a national network of food banks, shows that a similar expansion would reduce food bank operating costs by at least \$23.9 million.

There are also benefits for households. Other studies have found that when CEP is introduced, grocery spending falls by 6.6% among families with children. Nationally, a 10% increase in CEP access would lead to roughly \$163 million in reduced grocery spending annually. When combined with reduced expenses for food banks, these savings offset more than 90% of the government's spending on the program.

## Policy Implications

The biggest gains from universal free school meals occur in schools where many students do not meet the traditional criteria for free meals but still face real, persistent food insecurity. In these relatively well-off schools, "near-poor" families often fall just above the cutoff for public assistance. They may not appear in poverty statistics, but they still struggle and often go unseen. These are also the settings where there is a strong stigma around free lunch. For the small number of low-income students in higher-income schools, accepting a free meal can be socially isolating, leading to lower participation even when eligible.

This is exactly where district-level leadership can have the greatest impact. **District-level leaders should adopt the CEP across the entire school district to reduce stigma for poor students in well-off schools and extend vital support to students who are not otherwise eligible but still face hunger.**

The benefits will go beyond nutrition. Eliminating the administrative burden of income eligibility checks and meal tracking reduces costs and staff time. For many districts, systemwide adoption of CEP is a near cost-neutral decision with well-documented returns in student well-being, academic performance, and attendance. The case for district-wide CEP is not just about food—it is about equity, efficiency, and student success.

Expanding access to schoolwide free meals has the potential to address food insecurity among students, decrease stigma, and reduce pressure on local nonprofits. Strengthening the public safety net does not diminish the role of private charities; it allows them to better focus their resources on the remaining unmet needs. The interdependence of public and private aid is a key strength that smart policy can leverage to build

a more resilient safety net. As more states implement universal school meal programs, this research suggests that the benefits will extend far beyond the cafeteria line.

Read more in Krista Ruffini, Orgül Öztürk, and Pelin Pekgün, "**In-kind government assistance and crowd-out of charitable services: Evidence from free school meals.**" *Journal of Public Economics* 248 (2025): 105391.