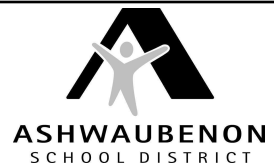


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Back to School Priorities Should Include Healthy Meals

As the sheen wears off on new pencils, backpacks, and binders, it's a perfect time to refocus our attention on that school essential that fuels students through the year: school meals.

School meals are a crucial part of every student's day, providing myriad benefits in the short and long term. They are often the most nutritious meal of a student's day,¹ reduce hunger and obesity, improve child development and school readiness, and support learning, behavior, and attendance.² As an enduring part of a child's school experience, school meals can have a positive impact on overall health, educational, and behavioral outcomes.³

The reality is, many families rely on public schools to help keep their kids fed, navigating eligibility requirements for free or reduced priced meals to fill that need. In fact, during the 2022-23 year, an average of about 11.1 million students nationwide ate free breakfast at a public or charter school, while 19 million ate free lunch. Another 1.6 million ate breakfast or lunch at a reduced price.⁴

Unfortunately, families who don't quite meet income eligibility requirements for free or reduced-priced meals may struggle to cover the full cost of those meals, which means they can't always keep up with their child's lunch balance. The result is multifold: School meal debt in Wisconsin alone increased from

¹ J. Lui, R. Micha, Y. Li, '[Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2778453?utm_source=For_The_Media&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ftm_links&utm_term=040921)', Jama Network, https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2778453?utm_source=For_The_Media&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ftm_links&utm_term=040921 (accessed 5 September 2024).

² 'Talking Points: Healthy School Meals for All', Food Research and Action Center (FRAC)

³ Hinrichs, P. (2010). 'The effects of the National School Lunch Program on education and health'. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 29(3), 479–505.

⁴ K. Severson, '[Why Are Free School Lunches Becoming a Campaign Issue?](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/13/dining/free-school-lunch-programs.html)', *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/13/dining/free-school-lunch-programs.html> (accessed 6 September 2024).

about \$520k in 2021 to about \$690k in 2023⁵. That's a roughly 49% increase from 2019, when the total debt totaled about \$480k, and makes it harder for schools' nutrition programs to operate. Meanwhile, students with a negative school lunch balance can face being denied access to a meal when trying to access sustenance in the lunch line, or even avoid the humiliation altogether and simply go without eating that day. Whatever the forces keeping consistent nourishment out of students' reach, the reality is staggering: today, **1 in 6 children in Wisconsin faces hunger**.⁶

To respond to the challenges baked into school meals, **the [Healthy School Meals for All \(HSM4A\) WI Coalition](#) is leading the effort for no-cost school meals for all K-12 Wisconsin students**. Families and schools got a taste of universal school meals during the COVID pandemic thanks to an emergency federal assistance program to ensure all students received lunch no matter their family's income, but the program expired in 2022. To fill the gap, Governor Tony Evers included it in his 2023-2025 state budget, estimating that the cost to adopt no-cost school meals statewide would be about [\\$55 per year per average tax payer](#), a fraction of the cost families currently pay for school meals. **In other words, there is a collective cost savings when we adopt HSM4A**. Although HSM4A didn't make the cut in the state budget, or through legislative proposals, the seed has been planted.

What do we get when all students can access no-cost meals during the school day? HSM4A would ease hunger, fuel students with nourishment to remain attentive throughout the day, and eliminate the stigma attached to free and reduced-price meals. It could also help to reduce racial disparities in health and education for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous children, who experience hunger at disproportionate rates and face systemic barriers to food access.⁷

Investing in free school meals for all students would ensure that all children, regardless of their families income, have access to the nutritious breakfast and lunch they need to learn and thrive. That said, we believe that when families understand the *Why* behind HSM4A, they will be empowered to ask their school districts not simply *Why Not*, but ***Why Not... NOW?***

To make Healthy School Meals for All a reality, the State of Wisconsin will need to take action, either by approving a program in our State Budget, or by passing a bill through our State Legislature. While that may sound like a job for lawmakers alone, we need your support to get us there!

How Can You Act?

- Support the HSM4A Coalition Movement. We are stronger when we come together as a community!
 - Publicly show your support for HSM4A by officially [joining the Coalition](#).

⁵ School Nutrition Association survey.

⁶ <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/wisconsin>

⁷ K. Severson, '[Why Are Free School Lunches Becoming a Campaign Issue?](#)'

- Attend and invite others to the 2024 [HSM4A WI Coalition Meetings](#). The next meeting takes place on Oct 10 at 1:30 PM.
- HSM4A won't happen overnight! Consider supporting students in your district TODAY. Call your local district's school nutrition department to learn how to donate to the school's **angel fund**.
- Explore and Share Further Reading
 - [HSM4A One Pager](#)
 - [FRAC: Top 10 Reasons to Support Healthy School Meals for All](#)
 - [FRAC: The Case for Healthy School Meals for All](#)

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