

Healthy School Meals for All

Healthy School Meals for All (also known as Universal Free School Meals) is a policy where breakfast and lunch are offered to all public school students for free, regardless of their household income, as part of the school day.

Research shows that universal free school meals reduce food insecurity, improve nutrition and academic performance, and generate much needed revenue for school nutrition programs. School meals are an integral part of the school day and should be no different than access to textbooks, technology, busing, and health services that are provided to all students without cost.

**It's time to prioritize Rhode Island's children, families, and schools!
Let's make free school meals a permanent part of the school day.**

Reduces Food Insecurity and Improves Learning



School meals play a critical role in student health, well-being, and academic success. Increasing access to school meals alleviates hunger, supports good nutrition, and positively impacts attendance, behavior, and cognition, particularly in the 41% of RI households with children who are food-insecure. (2022 RI Life Index)

No More Stigma in the Cafeteria



When all students can eat for free without concern for whether a parent/guardian has provided money for meals or completed a qualified meal benefit application, stress and stigma vanish. The children who need meals the most don't feel singled out. All students become equal in the cafe. No child should have to prove they are worthy of nutritious food.

Elimination of Meal Debt



Student meal debt in schools across RI has ballooned following the end of the federal free meal program during the pandemic. School districts must often pay off this debt with general education funds when student unpaid meal accounts aren't cleared. Turning educators into "bill collectors" isn't compatible with building positive and productive relationships between schools and families.

Federal income guidelines for free/reduced-price meals are nowhere near sufficient to meet the needs of struggling families. The meal benefit application process can also be intimidating, confusing, or shameful for some families.

Better Quality Meal Programs



Schools can better invest in food service programs as a result of greater participation with increased reimbursement. New equipment, staffing, local food, and more wholesome scratch cooking can be budgeted. With less of an administrative burden, programs can spend more time on engaging students in menu development, taste tests, and the cafeteria experience.

Healthy School Meals for All FAQs



Q: How will *Healthy School Meals for All* be funded in RI?

A: Federal funds through meal reimbursements will be maximized through United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs such as the Community Eligibility Program (CEP) and Provision 2. These programs allow schools to claim the highest number of meals and be reimbursed at the Federal “free” rate, based on established need, with zero state contribution. For meals that cannot be reimbursed at the Federal “free” rate, the state will reimburse educational entities the difference between the federal reimbursement rate for students who qualify for free meals and the rate the federal government reimburses for students who are full pay.

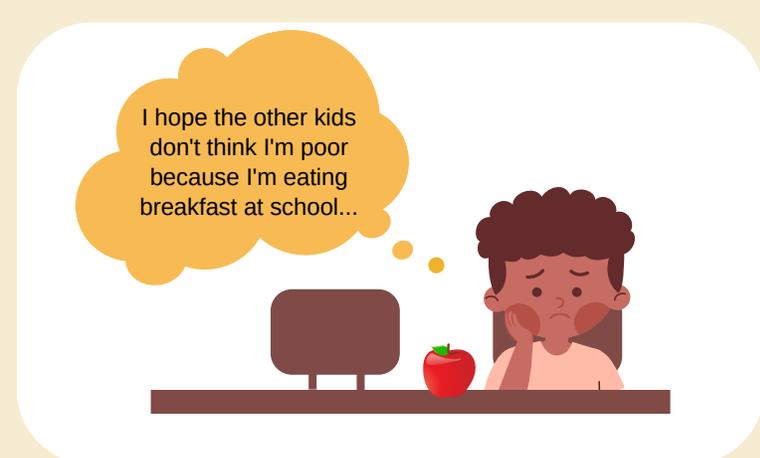
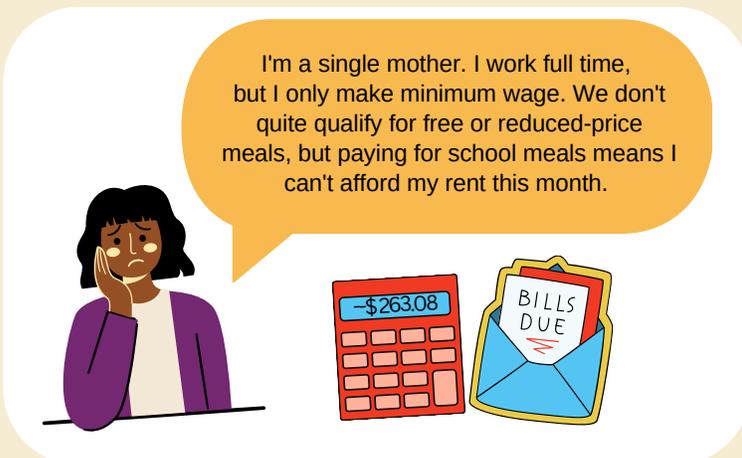
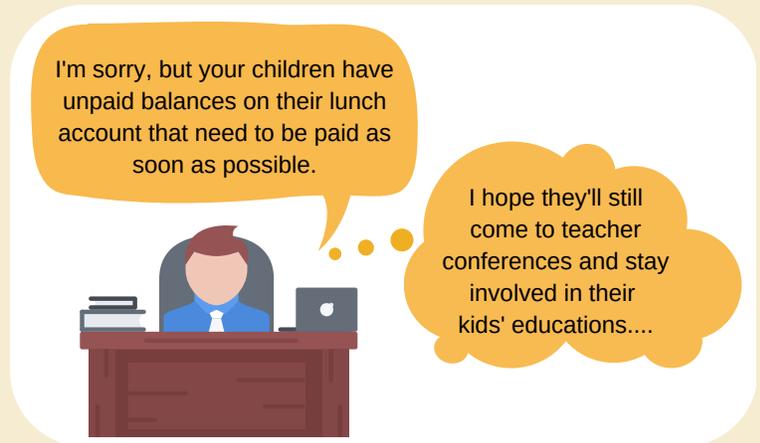
Q: How much will *Healthy School Meals for All* cost in RI?

A: The projected cost to the State could be between \$30 million - \$37.6 million. The true cost will be a function of several variables, including the total number of meals reimbursed with federal dollars and how many students participate in the program after meals are offered to all students without a cost. The cost projections are based on data from pandemic SY21-22 when meals were offered free to all students through a federal program.

Q: Does adopting *Healthy School Meals for All* impact education funding?

A: Governor McKee’s most recent budget recommendation includes a proposed state aid formula that no longer relies on meal benefit applications to determine state aid. If the state aid portion of the budget is enacted as currently proposed, *Healthy School Meals for All* would have no impact on state education funding.

Let's avoid scenarios like this in Rhode Island:



Questions?
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