Healthy School Meals for All Op-Ed Template

As a member(s) of the [Affiliate Name Here/Change to Individual] Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the largest organization of nutrition professionals in the country, every day we see the negative impact of poor nutrition on children. Before the COVID-19 pandemic most children’s diets fell short of recommendations for good health – now, they’re even worse due to empty grocery store shelves and rising food prices. As we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, now more than ever, we must make our children’s nutrition a top priority.  As Congress plans to reauthorize crucial child nutrition programs, it is vital to factor in the lessons learned from the pandemic.

The recently introduced Universal School Meals Program Act would make it permanent for every school-age child to have free meals at school, leveling the playing field so that all children are able to learn, play and thrive. Since the early days of the pandemic, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has offered free meals to all public school students and this will continue through the 2021-22 school year. Making this permanent would be a game changer for the millions of families who count on school meals.

[Option to include personal story of experience serving free school meals during COVID-19 here]

Healthy students are better learners, and school meals provide the nutrition children need to be successful in school. [Tufts researchers recently found](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2778453?utm_source=For_The_Media&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ftm_links&utm_term=040921) that school meals had better nutrition quality than meals eaten anywhere else. Healthy school meals prepare students to enter the workforce, setting them up for jobs in science, technology, business, and other emerging fields. When children don’t have access to healthy meals, hunger and malnutrition can take a toll on their overall health, mental wellbeing, and school success.

More students eating school meals is a win-win for the community as school meals stimulate the local economy, drives local food purchases from farmers and ranchers and creates well-paying jobs in school nutrition, food production, sales and distribution. More school meals served equals improved school production and service facilities, which will generate job growth in foodservice equipment manufacturing, facility engineering, construction and maintenance. Universal school meals for all would eliminate the crushing unpaid school meal debt reported by 75% of U.S. school districts and end the practice of refusing meals to students with unpaid meal charges.

Investing in school nutrition programs is more important than ever. The Universal School Meals Program Act would permanently provide free healthy meals and snacks to all school children regardless of income, eliminate school meal debt, and strengthen local economies. Now is the time to invest in nutrition and put healthy meals within easy reach for every child to safeguard their health and academic success.

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Action Alert link:

Let your member of Congress know that you support healthy school meals for all! <https://www.votervoice.net/EATRIGHT/1/Campaigns/85529/Respond>