

Literature Review

Benefits of Healthy School Meals for All

Sarah Martinelli MS, RD, SNS; Francesco Acciai, PhD; Emily Melnick, MPH, PhD; Punam Ohri-Vachaspati, PhD, RDN

School meals contribute to the health and well-being of children, a fact that became apparent at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were closed and student access to meals was limited. In response, USDA instituted waivers that allowed all students, irrespective of household income, to have access to free school meals during COVID-related school closures. The success of these policies has led several states in the country to continue offering free school meals to all children at no cost after the USDA waivers ended. This initiative is often referred to as **Healthy School Meals for All (HSM4A) and has become an important policy approach to ensure that all children have adequate access to food and are able to benefit from healthy school meals**. An alternative strategy to HSM4A that can increase access to school meals for some of the most vulnerable students is to remove the reduced-price co-pay. Removing this co-pay barrier can benefit many families who qualify for reduced-price meals but cannot afford the required co-pays.



To better understand the **wide range of benefits increased access to school meals provides to students, families, and schools**, a literature review of published research examining these benefits was released in 2021. The review outlined seven key findings associated with the implementation of HSM4A, including improvements in (1) school meal participation, (2) diet quality of students who participate in meals, (3) food security of participants' families, (4) academic performance, (5) attendance, (6) body mass index, and (7) school finances. Those findings are summarized below and can also be found [here](#).

Since the publication of that literature review in 2021, additional studies have been published, which add to the body of literature showing the benefits of policies that increase access to school meals. Key findings from these new studies are summarized in the table below. **A formal write-up of these results is also underway and will be shared by the Arizona Food Bank Network (AzFBN) soon.**

Summary of 2021 Literature Review Key Findings ¹	Summary of Key Findings Since 2021
Participation in School Meals	
Nearly all studies found an association between HSM4A and increased participation in school meals.	All studies that examined participation, all reported small increases in meal participation (2-5%) after the implementation of HSM4A or Universal Free Breakfast. ^{2,3,4,5}
Diet Quality	
The majority of studies found an association between universal lunch and better student diet quality.	None of the newer studies has focused on student diet quality.
Food Security	
There is evidence that HSM4A improves food security, especially for low-income families; however, only a few studies have evaluated this.	Only one study examined the relationship between the implementation of free school meals in low-income schools and food security and found no significant associations. ²
Academic Performance	
Nearly half the studies found universal lunch is positively associated with academic performance, none found adverse effects.	Only one newer study examined academic achievement. There was no change in achievement scores resulting from HSM4A in the full sample, but marginal improvement in reading scores was observed among Hispanic children. ²
Attendance	
Half the studies found HSM4A significantly improves student attendance among students from low-income and food-insecure households; no studies found adverse impacts on attendance.	Two newer studies examined the association between school attendance and HSM4A. ^{2,3} The first examined universal free breakfast only and reported no change in attendance. ³ The second study examined universal free breakfast and lunch and reported a small increase in attendance. ²
Body Mass Index (BMI)	
HSM4A has been shown to not increase BMI.	The newer studies that examined BMI are consistent with the prior finding that HSM4A does not increase BMI. ^{1,2} Andreyeva & Sun add that low-income students from schools participating in HSM4A had lower BMI. ³
School Finances	
Some evidence that food service budgets benefit from CEP, especially in schools with more students eligible for free or reduced-price meals.	One newer study examined school finances and supported the prior findings. This newer study reports that larger schools see a greater financial benefit. ⁶

Citations

1. Cohen, J.F., Hecht, A.A., McLoughlin, G.M., Turner, L. and Schwartz, M.B., 2021. Universal school meals and associations with student participation, attendance, academic performance, diet quality, food security, and body mass index: A systematic review. *Nutrients*, 13(3), p.911.
2. Andreyeva, T. and Sun, X., 2021. Universal School Meals in the US: What Can We Learn from the Community Eligibility Provision? *Nutrients*, 13(8), p.2634.
3. Bullock, S.L., Dawson-McClure, S., Truesdale, K.P., Ward, D.S., Aiello, A.E. and Ammerman, A.S., 2022. Associations between a Universal Free Breakfast Policy and School Breakfast Program Participation, School Attendance, and Weight Status: A District-Wide Analysis. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(7), p.3749.
4. Ferris, D., Jabbari, J., Chun, Y. and Sandoval, J.O., 2022. Increased School Breakfast Participation from Policy and Program Innovation: The Community Eligibility Provision and Breakfast after the Bell. *Nutrients*, 14(3), p.511.
5. Schneider, K.R., Oslund, J. and Liu, T., 2021. Impact of the community eligibility provision program on school meal participation in Texas. *Public Health Nutrition*, 24(18), pp.6534-6542.
6. Long, M.W., Marple, K. and Andreyeva, T., 2021. Universal free meals associated with lower meal costs while maintaining nutritional quality. *Nutrients*, 13(2), p.670.