



**BEACON CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT
ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES**

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To whom it may concern:

Grocery prices in the US are 10% higher than they were in 2021, and those prices are expected to climb.¹ Increased food costs lead to even more food insecurity across the country, and mean higher costs for districts that must use limited resources to provide nutritious meals. In New York state, around 800,000 students depend on free breakfast and lunch at school.

Historically, some students from low-income households haven't participated in free/reduced school meal programs because they're afraid of the stigma associated with being in the program. According to Food Service Director Katy Headwell of the Shenendehowa Central School District in New York, when children aren't included in the free meal program, it often leads to them eating poorly or not at all. Universal free meals remove the need for this administratively complex and potentially shaming process. It allows everyone to access nutritious meals without having to navigate any bureaucracy or to identify themselves as in need.

Many children eat up to half their daily calories at school.² A free universal meal program ensures that they have access to those critical calories, regardless of their ability to pay or their status with a meal program. It also represents a huge annual cost savings for low-income families.

The research on the impact of access to school meals is clear. It can improve students' health³ and the quality of their daily nutrition,⁴ increase academic performance,⁵ and significantly help households struggling with food insecurity.⁶

Anne Fiala, senior technical advisor for the US Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service, said that the agency does "acknowledge that the downstream effects from COVID-19 are still happening and they're far from over, and we're working hard to smooth this transition as much as possible." But this transition should not move backward, to the old way of doing things. It should be a transition to a more equitable and student-centered program, one that provides guaranteed access to nutritious options for students, removes the stigma and stress of applying for a meal program, erases student meal debt, and creates a safer, more nurturing environment that contributes to students' sense of belonging and well-being. This is an obvious benefit that impacts every aspect of student performance and health, and it should be prioritized.

We, the Board Members of the Beacon City School District, are asking for two things: First, lawmakers must push through an emergency waiver extending the free universal meal program through the next school year (2022-23), and second, they must make the program permanent across the United States. All children deserve access to nutritious daily meals, and the money that they or their family has should not be a barrier to this basic human right.

Respectfully submitted,

The Board of Education of the Beacon City School District

¹ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/summary-findings/>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2211335516301516>

³ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/1935924>

⁴ [https://www.jandonline.org/article/S2212-2672\(16\)30185-X](https://www.jandonline.org/article/S2212-2672(16)30185-X)

⁵ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pam.22175>

⁶ <https://bit.ly/3H5Qx4d>