

Impact of Massachusetts' Healthy School Meals for All Policy on Families

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Summary:

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, USDA waivers allowed all children in schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to receive school meals at no charge from March 2020 through June 2022. Formerly, children from families whose income was 130 percent of the poverty line or less were eligible for meals without charge, those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent were eligible for meals at reduced-price, and those above 185 percent paid full price. In 2022, Massachusetts implemented a Healthy School Meals for All (HSMFA) policy to continue to provide meals at no charge to all students. A sample selected to be representative of Massachusetts was recruited, and 284 households with school-aged children across Massachusetts were surveyed about the HSMFA policy. Overall, the majority (84%) of families in Massachusetts— across all income brackets— reported that school meals should be free for all students. Similarly, the majority ($\geq 80\%$) of families reported that Massachusetts' HSMFA policy saved their family money and time and reduced stress, and that HSMFA improved student behavior and academic achievement. When asked about the impact of ending the state's HSMFA policy, roughly two-thirds of households that were *near* eligible for free or reduced-priced meals and roughly a third of middle class households reported their ability to have enough food for their household would be hurt if school meals were not free for all families. Lastly, survey results indicated that when school meals are provided at no cost for all children, children are not embarrassed to eat them, but this stigma would likely return if this policy ended: 42% of families with children eligible for free or reduced-priced meals reported their child would be less likely to eat a school meal next year if it was not free for all children.



Background:

School meals play an important role in supporting children's nutrition, with many children receiving up to half their daily energy intake from school meals.¹ Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, students in schools participating in the federal school nutrition programs could receive school meals for free or at a reduced-price based on household income (i.e., children from families whose income was 130 percent of the federal poverty line or less were eligible for meals without charge; those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent were eligible for meals at reduced-price, and those above 185 percent paid full price) or by attending a school participating in a special NSLP provision such as the Community Eligibility Provision (which enables schools with higher poverty rates to provide meals to all students at no charge).² However, potentially due to the high cost of living in Massachusetts (free and reduced-priced meals income eligibility is the same across the contiguous United States), many families fell through the cracks because they did not qualify for free or reduced-priced meals but did not make enough money to afford the cost of living in MA.³ During the COVID-19 pandemic, NSLP schools provided school meals without charge to all students in the United States, but this national policy ended prior to the 2022-23 school year.⁴ However, Massachusetts passed a temporary policy to continue to provide meals at no cost to all students in schools participating in the NSLP throughout the state. This research brief summarizes the preliminary results of an evaluation examining the impact of Massachusetts' Healthy School Meals for All (HSMFA) policy on families.

Methods:

In 2023, a sample selected to be representative of Massachusetts was recruited by an independent research firm and n=284 parents with school-aged children were recruited across the state (see Supplemental Table for participant characteristics). Parents completed a survey that was developed in collaboration with multiple stakeholders, including anti-hunger organizations and school nutrition organizations, and was pilot tested among parents. Results were analyzed using linear regression adjusting for household income, and the child's grade, gender, and race/ethnicity.



Summary of Findings:

Across all income categories*:

- 84% of families reported that they felt school meals **should be free for all students.**
- 93% of families reported that their child was **not embarrassed to eat** school meals with a HSMFA policy.
- 84% of families reported that they believed HSMFA **improves student behavior and academic achievement.**
- 83% of families reported that HSMFA **saves their family money.**
- 83% of families reported that HSMFA **saves their family time.**
- 80% of families reported that HSMFA **reduces stress** for their families.

*No statistically significant difference by household income, categorized as: Near Eligible was a household income within 10% of the income threshold for FRPM (e.g., an income up to approximately \$63800 for a family of four); Middle class was a household income between 11-40% of the income threshold for FRPM (an income up to approximately \$83,000 for a family of four); Upper Middle class income was a household income of >41% of the federal income threshold for FRMP.

When asked about what would occur if Massachusetts's HSMFA policy were to end:

- 62% of families reported they would feel more stress (with statistically significantly more stress by families who were not Upper Middle class).
- 42% of **families eligible for free or reduced priced meals** reported that their child would be less likely to eat school meals if they were not free for all children.
- 61% of **families that were NEAR ELIGIBLE for free or reduced priced meals** reported their ability to have enough food for all in their household would be hurt if school meals were not free for all children.
- 34% of **families that were MIDDLE CLASS** reported their ability to have enough for all in their household would be hurt if school meals were not eligible for all children.

Implication and Recommendations:

The results of this survey are clear: the vast majority of parents across Massachusetts support the state's HSMFA policy. Families across all income levels report multiple benefits from this policy and concerns if this policy were to be discontinued. In particular, nearly half of households already eligible for free or reduced-priced meals reported their child would be less likely to eat school meals if it were not free for all children, likely due to stigma. Additionally, potentially due to the rising cost of foods and high cost of living in

Massachusetts, even families that are considered middle-class reported that they would struggle to have enough food for their household if Massachusetts' HSMFA policy were to end.

Overall, the research suggests that Massachusetts' HSMFA policy has multiple benefits for children and families and helps to ensure all children have consistent access to healthy school meals.

Suggested Citation: Cohen J, Gosliner W, Hecht C, Hecht K, Schwartz M, Zuercher M, Ritchie L. Research Brief: Impact of Massachusetts' Healthy School Meals for All. <https://www.childnourishlab.org/healthy-school-meals-for-all>

This research was funded by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Healthy Eating Research and Project Bread. The funders did not play any role in the data collection, analyses, or interpretation of study findings.



Citations

1. Briefel RR, Crepinsek MK, Cabili C, Wilson A, Gleason PM. School food environments and practices affect dietary behaviors of US public school children. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. 2009;109(2):S91-S107.
2. United States Department of Agriculture. Child Nutrition Programs: Community Eligibility Provision – Increasing Options for Schools <https://public-inspection.federalregister.gov/2023-05624.pdf>
3. Calculator MloTMLW. Living Wage Calculation for Massachusetts. <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/25>
4. United States Department of Agriculture. FNS Responds to COVID-19. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/coronavirus>

Supplemental Table 1. Participant Characteristics

	N	%
Eligibility for Free or Reduced-Price Meals (FRPM)		
Eligible for FRPM ¹		
Free	62	21.83
Reduced	38	13.38
Not Eligible for FRPM ²		
Near Eligible	44	15.49
Middle Class	29	10.2
Upper Middle Class	111	39.08
Student Grade		
Elementary (grades 2-5)	135	47.54
Middle (grades 6-8)	80	28.17
High (grades 9-12)	69	24.3
Student Gender		
Girl	137	48.24
Boy	139	48.94
Other	8	2.82

¹Based on USDA eligibility for FRPM accounting for household size

² Near Eligible was defined as a household income within 10% of the income threshold for FRPM (e.g., an income up to approximately \$63800 for a family of four); Middle class was defined as a household income between 11-40% of the income threshold for FRPM (an income up to approximately \$83,000 for a family of four); Upper Middle class income was defined as a household income of >41% of the federal of the income threshold for FRMP.