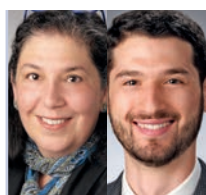


# Expand Access to Free School Food?

*Debating plans to increase federal support for child nutrition*

The Community Eligibility Provision of the National School Lunch Program allows high-poverty schools to offer subsidized school lunches free of charge to all students, regardless of an individual family's financial need. President Joe Biden has proposed expanding the provision by lowering the threshold for schools to adopt community eligibility. U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders and other legislators want to expand nutrition programs further, to provide a free breakfast, snack, lunch, and dinner to every student, regardless of family income. During the school closures wrought by the pandemic, public schools gave many families electronic benefits or checks to compensate for missed lunches and breakfasts, even through the summer, and in some cases provided boxed meals or bags of groceries for pickup. How far should the federal government go in expanding school-based nutrition programs beyond the free or reduced prices lunches for some that date back to the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act of 1946? Weighing in on this question are Amy Ellen Schwartz and Michah Rothbart of Syracuse University and Max Eden of the American Enterprise Institute.



## Let More Schools Offer Free Lunch for All

BY AMY ELLEN SCHWARTZ AND  
MICHAH WEITZMAN ROTHBART

**R**ECENT CHANGES to the National School Lunch Program have allowed some schools to offer free meals to *all* students, regardless of family income. This program expansion, known as the Community Eligibility Provision, applies to schools serving communities with low-income rates that exceed a federally designated threshold. Now, spurred in part by the impact of the Covid pandemic on students, President Joe Biden has proposed lowering this threshold and increasing the generosity of subsidies to Community Eligibility Provision schools. Some policy-makers and advocates are pushing for even further expansion: offering free breakfast, snack, lunch, and dinner to every student, regardless of family income; having schools

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## There's No Free Lunch

BY MAX EDEN

**B**EFORE THE PANDEMIC, more than half of American public-school students were eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont has proposed expanding the program to provide free breakfast, lunch, and dinner to every American public-school student. President Joe Biden is pushing a more modest reform: lowering the threshold for “community eligibility” for free or reduced-price lunch to cover another projected 9.7 million students—though this number may prove an underestimate.

There is a strong case for having the government provide food to children whose parents can't afford to feed them adequately, but that's not the question at hand. The question

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*Third grader Eliana Vigil checks out in the lunch line at the Gonzales Community School in Santa Fe.*



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provide boxed lunches or groceries when school meals are unavailable; or sending pandemic-style payments to families to defray meal expenses

during summers, school vacations, or weekends.

While the new proposals vary, the fundamental idea of making school lunch free for all students makes a lot of sense. A robust body of evidence points to positive effects of free lunch for all on a range of student outcomes, including test scores, nutrition, and disciplinary suspensions, with no persuasive evidence of negative unintended consequences for students or school budgets. In a 2021 national study, Krista Ruffini analyzed data from the Stanford Education Data Archive and found that math performance increases by 0.02 standard deviations in districts with the largest shares of students in Community Eligibility Provision schools (though effects on reading scores were inconsistent and statistically insignificant). Our own work finds slightly larger effect sizes for both math and English language arts (for both poor and non-poor children) using student-level administrative data from New York City. Susan M. Gross and colleagues sur-

minority students.) In a 2013 study, Jacob Leos-Urbel and colleagues used student-level data from New York City to explore impacts of universal free breakfast, finding increased participation for poor and non-poor students but limited evidence of impacts on academic outcomes overall (though there were some positive effects on attendance among poor Black students).

As for dinner or snacks, the research is thin, but the logistical challenges and resource requirements suggest that the costs of providing these meals would be high and that student participation in a dinner program would be limited.

### Current Programs

Under the traditional rules of the school lunch program, meals are offered free to students from families with income under 130 percent of federal poverty line, at a reduced price to those with family income under 185 percent, and at full price to those with family income exceeding 185 percent. The federal government reimburses school districts based on the number of meals served, with rates depending on the proportions of meals served to students eligible for free,

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veyed 427 students in eight schools that met the Community Eligibility threshold. They found that food insecurity was higher among students attending schools that chose not to participate in the Community Eligibility Provision than among students at schools that did adopt the program. As for behavioral effects, Nora Gordon and Krista Ruffini studied national school-level suspension data from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights and found that schoolwide free meals reduced suspensions among white male elementary-school students by about 17 percent, with statistically insignificant but substantively meaningful reductions among other subgroups of elementary-school students. Previous research has also consistently found that adopting the Community Eligibility Provision increases student participation in school-lunch programs.

A somewhat thinner literature documents small positive effects of free school breakfast, with lower student participation and cost. In 2014, for example, Diane Schanzenbach and Mary Zaki used U.S. Department of Agriculture experimental data to estimate impacts of universal free breakfast and breakfast-in-the-classroom programs, finding small increases in meal-program participation but little evidence that students increased their overall daily food consumption. (They found improved health only among students attending urban, high-poverty schools, and improved behavior only among

reduced-price, or full-price meals. Under the Community Eligibility Provision, schools (or groups of schools) can adopt “universal free meals”—extending free meals to all children, regardless of income—if the school’s share of students participating in SNAP or other means-tested programs exceeds 40 percent, with federal reimbursement determined by the share of students participating in these programs.

While reimbursement rates, eligibility criteria, regulations, and financing are set at the federal level, schools and districts have considerable discretion in program adoption and implementation. This broad latitude leads to wide variation in program specifics. Schools vary in meals served (breakfast, lunch, or snacks), menus (hot or cold options, fresh or prepackaged cuisine), schedule (service hours, school year only or summer too) and dining location (cafeteria or classrooms). Federal guidelines for school meals ensure they meet certain nutrition standards, so for many students school meals may be more healthful than meals brought from home or purchased outside school.

At the same time, parents and students can decide whether they want to participate. Students can bring brown-bag meals and forgo the school lunch. Some eat breakfast at home, and others skip it. Many participate on some days and not on others. Indeed, participation is far from complete, even among poor students and even when it is free. To some extent, participation

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is whether the government should feed children whose parents can afford it. Conservatives have traditionally argued “no” from the perspective of fiscal responsibility. Progressives counter that universal school lunch would reduce paperwork burdens, yielding administrative efficiency gains. Another claim is that universal free lunch will fight the stigma and taunting kids who get free lunch reportedly experience. If everyone were eligible for the program, the argument goes, the lower-income kids wouldn’t get “lunch-shamed.”

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that universal free lunch would indeed mitigate bullying and that kids wouldn’t just find other pretexts to pick on each other.

Bullying, though, is hardly the only moral question that’s involved. An international perspective may help clarify some of the issues. Schools in Switzerland, by and large, do not provide lunch. Rather, students break for two hours midday and generally walk back home to be fed by their parents. The sight of young children walking through the streets by themselves is unremarkable in high-trust Swiss society. In low-trust

the Cleveland, Ohio, public schools, she was unnerved by the entitled attitude her elementary students took to the free school breakfasts consumed in her classroom (not to mention by the massive food waste). So she asked her students, before they ate, to say in unison: “Thank you, State of Ohio.”

She thought this was better than no expression of gratitude. She was probably right, but I found it unsettling. As a high school student, I couldn’t articulate why, but today I can. The children had to contemplate the state as provider, rather than reflecting on how the love and labor of parents brought food to their plate. That experience shapes a child’s moral worldview, with human consequences that evade econometric analysis. Since the government, not the family, is already providing the education, the food may seem like a minor detail. But as the religions recognize, it carries significant meaning.

Progressives eager to expand school lunches, breakfasts, and dinners may be disappointed to discover that even after all the heavily touted efforts to make school lunches more local and nutritious, what gets served in school cafeterias remains heavily influenced by Big Agriculture and its lobbyists. Expect more mystery meat and french fries, not free-range arugula or heirloom

### **If kids apply stigma to behaviors that go against norms, then universal free lunch could generate a stigma against kids bringing brown-bag lunches, discouraging parental food preparation.**

American society, by contrast, it can provoke calls to the police.

Swiss parents like having their children come home for lunch, because the thought of turning them over to a government institution all day is abhorrent to them. Many Americans, in contrast, find it hard to imagine a non-pandemic world in which a parent would be expected to be at home during the workday to serve lunch. Which attitude is more conducive to a flourishing society? The economists who compiled the 2021 World Happiness Report ranked Switzerland third and the United States 18th on citizen happiness.

The Swiss have it righter, I suspect. My judgment is based less on the word of economists than that of my mother. She frequently told me that she took great joy in preparing my breakfast and lunch every day. That struck me as a natural and beautiful thing. Parents have a primal drive to provide food for their children. But parents are also sensitive and responsive to the social pressures their children face. If kids apply stigma to behaviors that go against norms, then universal free lunch could generate a stigma against kids bringing brown-bag lunches, discouraging parental food preparation.

Would that really be good for parents or for children? I’m reminded again of my mother. In cultures and religious traditions throughout the world, it is an age-old custom to give thanks to God before or after meals, recognizing that eating is partly a sacramental act. When my mother was a teacher in

citrus. The same progressives who blame meat consumption for global warming now want to serve more factory-farmed hamburgers, bacon, and sausage in school cafeterias. Even the vaunted liberal commitment to “diversity, equity, and inclusion” is forgotten when it comes to children who may want to eat kosher or halal, prefer to avoid meat entirely, or just have allergies or food sensitivities. A salad bar or cereal may be available, but school cafeteria menus largely serve majority tastes.

And to what end? A literature review published in 2020 in the *American Journal of Public Health* examined the effects of the Community Eligibility Provision that Biden seeks to expand. The review, by Johns Hopkins scholar Amelie Hecht and co-authors, noted that, of five studies on universal breakfast, “3 found no change in test scores and 2 found some improvements.” Among studies focusing specifically on Community Eligibility for lunch, “2 detected improvement in test scores for some subjects and age groups and the third detected no change.” The authors note that the positive effects were “relatively small” and “similar in magnitude to those seen when families receive other forms of income support, such as the earned income tax credit.” Why not, then, just allocate the additional money directly to parents, the way that the government already does with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and did during the pandemic when schools were

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decisions reflect family preferences and resources and the quality, cost, and accessibility of outside options (say, fast food restaurants nearby).

But participation also reflects the quality and appeal of school meals and the social and physical context. Cramped cafeterias, long service lines, awkward schedules, student perceptions of “low quality” meals “for poor kids,” and stigma all dampen participation among poor and non-poor students alike. Universal free meals are likely to reduce stigma and boost participation—again, among both poor and non-poor—although participation is rarely “universal.”

Prior to the pandemic, more than 30 million children received school lunch and 15 million had breakfast daily in

school meals would not have otherwise been free—driven, perhaps, by impacts on students whose family income only modestly exceeds the threshold (lower-middle-income families). Studies also show improvement among the poor students who would qualify for free meals anyway—perhaps owing to a reduction in the stigma associated with participating in school lunch, changes in menu options, or easier program administration.

At the same time, there is little evidence of unintended negative consequences—no increases in child obesity and no explosion or meaningful increases in school food-program deficits (indeed, our 2021 working paper showed that deficits shrank, on average, in New York State). And free meals for all may even have some unintended positive

## **Studies have shown that universal free-meal programs increase student participation in school meals, which research indicates are nutritionally better than the meals students might otherwise consume.**

almost 100,000 schools and other institutions nationwide, and roughly 30,000 schools had adopted the Community Eligibility Provision. Afterschool snacks were offered at roughly 25,000 sites and the Summer Food Service Program was in place at 47,000 locations, reaching a much smaller population.

### **Expanding Access to Free Breakfast and Lunch**

The Biden administration proposes two changes to expand universal free meals under the Community Eligibility Provision: 1) lowering the poverty threshold for eligibility, thereby increasing the number of schools that qualify and 2) increasing reimbursements for school meals, making it more affordable for schools to participate. There are several reasons to believe these changes will benefit America’s children.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to expand the program is the persuasive evidence that it works. Studies have shown that the Community Eligibility Provision and other universal free-meal programs increase student participation in school meals, which research indicates are nutritionally better than the meals students might otherwise consume. In 2015, for instance, Michelle Caruso and Karen Cullen studied lunches brought from home by 242 elementary-school and 95 middle-school students in 12 schools in Houston, Texas. The researchers found higher sodium content and fewer servings of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fluid milk in these lunches than required under National School Lunch Program standards. As for academic outcomes, recent research shows schoolwide free-meal programs improve student performance on standardized tests, reduce suspensions, and may improve attendance. As might be expected, studies show significant improvements among kids for whom

consequences—a 2021 working paper by Jessie Handbury and Sarah Moshary suggests that a school’s adoption of the Community Eligibility Provision may even lower food prices in nearby grocery stores!

To be sure, federal outlays have increased, but by a small amount per pupil, and the bang for the buck in academic outcomes is larger than that of many alternative education reforms, including class-size reduction or increases in teacher salaries. Altogether, annual federal spending on school-meal programs of roughly \$390 per pupil (\$18.4 billion total) is 3 percent of total educational spending, which amounts to roughly \$13,000 per pupil.

Will the proposed changes yield similar benefits? The design of Biden’s reforms is promising: lowering the eligibility threshold extends the option to more schools, but doesn’t require universal free meals. If schools decide wisely, those opting in will benefit, and those that will not benefit will opt out. Increasing the subsidy’s generosity makes it easier—and more attractive—for schools to opt in, offsetting lost revenue from school-lunch fees or higher costs. To be sure, participation is likely to remain incomplete. While the adoption of Community Eligibility has been increasing, nearly one-third of the nearly 50,000 schools eligible for the program have so far declined to join, citing reasons such as high rates of lunch purchases among “full-pay” students, constraints on physical and human capacity, and concerns about financial implications, among others.

Might it be better to devote school-lunch funds exclusively to low-income students? Lowering the threshold means an increasing share of students in newly eligible schools will be “non-poor,” and more middle- and high-income families will

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closed with the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer Program?

Perhaps the strongest argument for spending additional money on the federal school-lunch system is that school lunches are, reportedly, much healthier than grocery-store bought food. A 2021 study in *JAMA Network Open* by Junxiu Liu and co-authors found that, after the Obama administration's school-lunch overhaul, accord-

American Heart Association are right or wrong in their dietary assumptions. The USDA's food pyramid is subject to all kinds of political pressure, and expert advice on what to eat is subject to change. It wasn't that long ago that the experts were telling us to eat margarine instead of butter, then reversing course to warn of the dangers of trans fats. Or those same experts were telling us to eat pasta instead of fats, then discovering that too many carbohydrates were bad for us. When the menu planning

**Even after all the heavily touted efforts to make school lunches more local and nutritious, what gets served in school cafeterias remains heavily influenced by Big Agriculture and its lobbyists.**

ing to the American Heart Association's diet index, "diet quality for foods from schools improved significantly. . . . By 2017–2018, food consumed at schools had the highest quality, followed by food from grocery stores, other sources, worksites, and restaurants. . . . Findings were similar for [the USDA's] Healthy Eating Index." That study relied on survey respondents' self-reports of what they ate, rather than on an external observation. School lunches are nutritionally different from other foods, but whether they are better or worse depends on whether the USDA and the

is nationally centralized, or organized to meet federal standards rather than a family's, erroneous nutrition choices are magnified and imposed on tens of millions of children.

The old saying goes: "There ain't no such thing as a free lunch." It's true, but not only from a budgetary perspective. Making school lunch universally available would also come at a high moral, social, and potentially health-related price.

*A fuller version of this essay is available at [aei.org](https://www.aei.org).*

## SCALIA'S CONSTITUTION

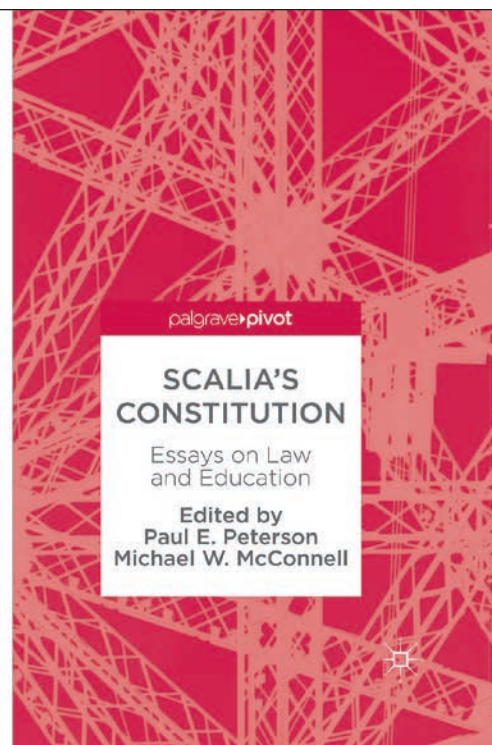
### *Essays on Law and Education*

Editors: Paul E. Peterson and Michael W. McConnell  
September 2017

*"Scalia's Constitution: Essays on Law and Education provides a valuable examination of the remarkable Justice's jurisprudence. The educational system of the United States, although not mentioned in the Constitution, has provoked some of the most contentious legal conflicts ever argued before the Supreme Court. The essays in this book, from a variety of perspectives, give an insightful review of Scalia's judicial doctrines and teachings that relate to this subject."*

—Ed Meese III

Ronald Reagan Distinguished Fellow Emeritus, Meese Center for Legal and Judicial Studies, Institute for Constitutional Government, The Heritage Foundation



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benefit. Despite the intuitive appeal of targeting, however, universality seems to benefit poor students more than the traditional means-tested

programs and helps other needy students at the same time.

### Should Schools Offer Dinner Too?

While the success of the free breakfast and lunch programs might suggest schools should offer dinner as well, logistical and practical challenges and likely lower demand make for a weak case. Since dinner-at-school would probably be offered some hours after the end of the school day, it could require keeping school buildings open longer, extending work hours for cafeteria workers or adding a second shift, and forgoing competing civic and educational uses of school buildings. Further, demand is likely to be lower for a meal not adjacent to the school day, as students participate in activities elsewhere and many people value family dinnertime. The farther food delivery gets from the core instructional day (vis-a-vis time of day, week, or year), the less efficient such meal service is likely to be. Dinner-at-school may be “a meal too far.”

Similar considerations make providing summer meals and weekend meals less compelling. Expanding SNAP or other

federal anti-poverty or anti-hunger programs may be a more effective way of supporting child nutrition outside of school hours. Still, there are circumstances under which extending the food program *does* make sense—in high-poverty schools, for example—and pilot programs such as those implemented years ago for the school-lunch program, breakfast program, and the Community Eligibility Provision could serve to test the merit of these possible expansions of the program.

### Let Them Eat Lunch (and Breakfast)

The Biden administration proposes expanding universal free lunch and breakfast through a lower eligibility threshold for adopting the Community Eligibility Provision and through a more generous reimbursement rate. These proposals are backed by research on the effects of the school-lunch program, and the availability of free meals for all promises to provide much-needed help to students working to overcome challenges posed by the pandemic. The comparative advantage of schools providing meals for students during school hours, or just before or after, appears quite high. School meals offered beyond these hours, however, are not likely to draw robust participation, may stigmatize partakers, and could strain resource-strapped schools and districts already juggling a panoply of responsibilities. **E**



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