

# U.S. Rep. Moore and colleagues: Seek to permanently end child hunger in schools

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WASHINGTON, May 11 – Rep. Gwen Moore (D-Wis.), Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.), Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.), Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.), and Rep. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.) along with 15 colleagues in the Senate and 68 in the House of Representatives, today introduced legislation that provides a permanent solution to end child hunger in schools by offering free breakfast, lunch, dinner, and a snack to all students, preschool through high school, regardless of income, eliminating all school meal debt, and strengthening local economies by incentivizing local food procurement.

The Universal School Meals Program Act of 2023 builds on the highly successful universal free school meals program that Congress funded to combat the spike in child and youth hunger brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. While various efforts were made to bolster and extend the program since 2020, it expired in September 2022 leaving nearly 30 million children who rely on free or reduced-price lunch in a state of uncertainty and strain.

The legislation is cosponsored by Sens. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wis.), Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), Cory Booker (D-N.J.), John Fetterman (D-Pa.), Mazie Hirono (D-Hawaii), Ed Markey (D-Mass.), Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.), Alex Padilla (D-Calif.), Tina Smith (D-Minn.), Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), Raphael Warnock (D-Ga.), Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), Peter Welch (D-Vt.), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), and Ron Wyden (D-Ore.); and by Reps. Alma Adams, Jake Auchincloss, Becca Balint, Nanette Barragán, Joyce Beatty, Jamaal Bowman, Julia Brownley, Cori Bush, Tony Cárdenas, André Carson, Greg Casar, Sean Casten, Judy Chu, Emanuel Cleaver II, Jasmine Crockett, Mark DeSaulnier, Adriano Espaillat, Dwight Evans, Maxwell Alejandro

Frost, Ruben Gallego, Sylvia Garcia, Jesús “Chuy” García, Jimmy Gomez, Raul Grijalva, Jahana Hayes, Brian Higgins , Jared Huffman, Jonathan Jackson, Sheila Jackson Lee, Sara Jacobs, Pramila Jayapal, Ro Khanna, Ann McLane Kuster, John B. Larson, Barbara Lee, Summer Lee, Mike Levin, Zoe Lofgren, Seth Magaziner, Betty McCollum, Morgan McGarvey, Jim McGovern, Grace Meng, Gwen Moore, Joseph Morelle, Seth Moulton, Kevin Mullin, Jerrold Nadler, Grace F. Napolitano, Joe Neguse, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, Jimmy Panetta, Mark Pocan, Ayanna Pressley, Delia C. Ramirez, Linda Sánchez, Jan Schakowsky, Adam Schiff, Haley Stevens, Mark Takano, Rashida Tlaib, Jill Tokuda, Paul D. Tonko, Ritchie Torres, Bonnie Watson Coleman, and Nikema Williams.

**Rep. Moore** said: “Providing free school meals is a crucial investment in the health, education, and well-being of America’s children. It ensures that all students, regardless of their family’s financial situation, have access to nutritious meals that support their physical and mental development. Additionally, free school breakfasts and lunches have been shown to improve academic performance, reduce absenteeism, and decrease food insecurity. This legislation is a crucial step in creating a more equitable educational system by ensuring that all students have the nourishment they need to succeed, as well as lifting the financial burden and stigma off families struggling to afford food. By investing in our children’s future through free school meals, we are also investing in the future of our communities and our nation.”

“It is an international embarrassment that today, in the richest country in the history of the world, we are seeing record numbers of children and youth struggling with hunger on a daily basis,” said **Sen. Sanders**. “We cannot continue to prop up a grossly unjust economy in which the very rich get richer while millions of working families struggle to afford the most basic necessities of life, from paying for rent and medications to feeding their children. Kids cannot learn if they are hungry and every child deserves a quality education free of hunger. What we’ve seen during this pandemic is that a universal approach to school meals works. We cannot go backwards. It is time for Congress to pass this legislation to ensure no student goes hungry again.”

“No child should be forced to learn on an empty stomach,” said **Rep. Omar**. “At the outset of the pandemic, I authored and passed the MEALS Act to make sure every school district had the flexibility to continue providing school meals to every student. As a result, nearly 30 million children were fed. Five states, including my home state of Minnesota, have now addressed child hunger in their states by

passing free and universal school meals for all, and over a dozen others support similar policies. Universal school meals is not just commonsense policy; it is also extremely popular. Nearly 75% of Americans support permanent universal school meals—including majority of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. It's time to listen to the demands of our constituents and at long last make school meals free and universal for all kids."

"In the richest country on earth, it is unacceptable that millions of kids go hungry each day," said **Sen. Gillibrand**. "The Universal School Meals Program Act would provide funding for free breakfast, lunch, dinner, and a snack for students who need them and slash burdensome red tape for school administrators. It would make our families and communities healthier and stronger, keep kids in school, and work to fight the stigma too often associated with meal programs. I'm proud to be introducing this critical legislation today and look forward to getting it passed."

"Every child deserves a quality education and a fair shot at success. No child deserves to go hungry. I am working hard to deliver resources for our kids' education, and I am going to work equally hard to make sure our kids are fed – so that the pangs of hunger aren't undercutting the opportunities ahead of them," said **Sen. Heinrich**, Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee overseeing USDA nutrition programs. "This legislation would take New Mexico's recent universal school meals and make it permanent nationwide, while also helping to save our state up to \$30 million annually. When we invest in our children, we invest in our future."

"No child in America should be hungry—period, end of story," said **Congressman James P. McGovern**. "In the richest country in the history of the world, every child that does not have enough to eat is a policy failure and a moral outrage. We have a responsibility not just to teach kids reading and math, but to ensure they have healthy, nutritious food at school. I'm proud to work with Senator Sanders and Congresswoman Omar on this important legislation to continue building the political will to end hunger once and for all. Our kids deserve nothing less."

More than 34 million Americans today, including 9 million children, are food insecure, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. By offering universal school meals during the pandemic, schools across the nation helped to reduce food insecurity in struggling households with children by about 7 percent from 2020 to the summer of 2021. However, without a permanent solution to provide free meals to all students, schools eventually reverted to the complicated myriad of paperwork,

programs, and social stigma that leave out or discourage too many young people from accessing meals throughout the day. Upon the expiration of the pandemic meal waivers, many students from homes with incomes just above 130 percent of the poverty line, \$34,450 for a family of four, were no longer able to receive free meals at school.

However, again and again, studies show that students with access to free breakfast have improved attendance rates and perform better in school. Free and accessible school meals have also shown to reduce financial stress for students and families, improve health outcomes in students, reduce stigma associated with the programs, and lead to fewer behavioral incidents and lower suspension rates. Teachers, principals, and school leaders across the country have also ranked hunger as a top issue affecting their students' learning and health.

The Universal School Meals Program Act of 2023 provides the most cost-effective and inclusive model for students, families, teachers, public schools, childcare providers, and communities by ensuring all students have access to nutritious meals throughout the day. In addition to providing free breakfast, lunch, dinner, and a snack to all school children and youth regardless of income, this legislation:

- **Increases the reimbursement rate for school meals** so the full cost of producing meals is covered.
- **Puts an end to school lunch shaming**, including heinous scare tactics aimed at school meal debt collection.
- **Provides additional incentive for local food procurement**, including protecting and promoting small family farms, ensuring local ingredients and learning opportunities for students, and enriching local economies.
- **Reimburses schools for all school meal debt and stops the harassment of parents and students.** A November 2022 survey by the School Nutrition Association, found that 96.3 percent of districts reported that the end of federal waivers has led to an increase in unpaid debt.
- **Provides summer meals and summer EBT to all children.** Currently, only communities where 50 percent of children and youth are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch may operate a summer meals program. This bill makes all communities eligible regardless of income.

- **Strengthens and expands the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).** This legislation expands the number of allowable meal services to three meals and a snack per day, eliminates the two-tiered reimbursement rate for CACFP, and allows childcare providers to receive the highest reimbursement rate regardless of income.
- **Amends other laws referring to free-and-reduced price lunch.**

*The Universal School Meals Program Act of 2023 is endorsed by nearly 100 organizations, including Aki's Kitchen, American Heart Association, Appetite For Change, Association of State Public Health Nutritionists (ASPHN), Cambridge Economic Opportunity Committee, Church Women United in New York State, City Harvest, Climate Reality Project SWPA, Community Kitchen Pittsburgh, Food Research and Action Center, Fruit Belt Advisory Council, Galway CSD, GRACE/End Child Poverty California, Grassroots Gardens WNY, Guilford Public Schools, Hawaii Children's Action Network Speaks!, Health and Welfare Council of Long Island-Kierste, HOPE, Hunger Free America, Hunger solutions minnesota, Idaho Hunger Relief Task Force, Jewish Family and Children's Service of Minneapolis, Just Harvest, Lettuce Turnip the Beet Sustainability Collective, Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, Macedon Public Library, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, Mid-South Foodbank SNAP Coordinator, Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op, MidSouth Food Bank, National Association of Social Workers, National Association of Social Workers, California Chapter, National Education Association, National Family Family Coalition, NEA-NM, New York School Nutrition association, Norwich Public Schools, Our Community Cares Camp, Parent Voices CA, Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon, Pittsburgh food policy council, Plant it Further, School Nutrition Association, Second Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Tennessee, Second Harvest of Silicon Valley, Shriver Center on Poverty Law, Sierra Harvest, Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior, Soul Fire Farm, South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center, St. Peter RC School, Tennessee Justice Center, University District Food Bank, and Vernon Public Schools.*