

## Introduction

One in six children in Connecticut is food insecure and uncertain about where their next meal will come from.<sup>1</sup> Schools often serve as a reliable source of meals for children, sometimes providing the only meal they will have that day. Research has shown that providing students with nutritious meals can reduce food insecurity, increase academic performance, and improve student behavior.<sup>2</sup> With many school districts facing the dilemma of choosing between funding school meals or other essential programs, staff, and student services, it is crucial to understand the current state of school meal programs in Connecticut, and what changes might be coming from the federal government.

This briefing offers a high-level overview of school meal programs by examining the current state of these programs in Connecticut, how proposed federal policy changes might impact the state, and what proposals are being considered by the state legislature to invest in these programs.

## What are school meal programs?

Every year, eligible students across the country are provided free or reduced-prices meals through school meal programs. Under the guidance of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) school nutrition programs, federal funding is provided to school districts for various programs that provide low-cost or no-cost meals to students. School meal programs offered in Connecticut include the:

- [National School Lunch Program](#);
- [Seamless Summer Option](#);
- [School Breakfast Program](#);
- [Afterschool Snack Program](#);
- [Special Milk Program](#);
- [Food Distribution Program](#); and
- [Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program](#).<sup>3</sup>

## How is eligibility determined for school meal programs?

Eligibility for school meal programs is determined by household income levels for students as compared to federal poverty guidelines.<sup>4</sup> Annually, the USDA releases Income Eligibility Guidelines for Child Nutrition Programs, which outline the formula for calculating eligibility for school meal programs.<sup>5</sup> Schools then provide parents and guardians a paper income verification application to establish their eligibility.<sup>6</sup>

A student is eligible to receive free school meals if their family's annual household income is 130% or less than the federal poverty level. For the 2025-26 school year, a student from a family of four would be eligible to receive free school meals if their family's annual household income is \$41,795 or less.<sup>7</sup> Students who foster youth, migrants, homeless, or

runaway youth — or participate in certain government-sponsored programs — are also eligible for free school meals.<sup>8,A</sup>

Meanwhile, a student is eligible to receive reduced-price school meals if their family's annual household income is less than 185% of the federal poverty level but greater than 130% of the federal poverty level. For the 2025-26 school year, a student from a family of four would be eligible to receive reduced-price school meals if their family's annual household income is \$59,478 or less but greater than \$41,795.<sup>9</sup>

Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) and schools with significant proportions of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals may also offer universal free meals through the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) without requiring income verification applications.<sup>10</sup>

## Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) Program

The federal CEP is a significant development in school meal programs and a crucial step toward ensuring all students have access to nutritious meals.<sup>11</sup> Part of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, the CEP enables LEAs and schools with high percentages of economically disadvantaged students to provide free meals to all students — eliminating stigma and the need for inefficient paper applications.<sup>12</sup>

Currently, to be eligible for the CEP, at least 25% of a school's or district's total enrollment must be eligible for free school meals based on their family receiving benefits through one of several government programs, including: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Food Distribution Program for Indian Reservations (FDPIR), or — for most states, including Connecticut — Medicaid.

## Current State of School Meal Programs

Approximately one in five children in the United States live in food insecure households, limiting their access to consistent and adequate meals.<sup>13</sup> As noted above, for many students, their school may be the only place where they have access to food or nutritious meals — making it imperative to understand the current state of school meal programs at the federal and state level.<sup>14</sup>

### Federal Level

Currently, federal funding that is essential for school nutrition programs remains uncertain as Congress goes through a budget reconciliation process and hundreds of billions of dollars in overall federal spending have been proposed to be cut. While cuts to school meal programs, as well as proposals that would raise the eligibility threshold for the CEP, were not part of the \$330 billion in proposed cuts recommended by the U.S. House

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<sup>A</sup> These programs include: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Food Distribution Program for Indian Reservations (FDPIR), and Head Start. Food Research & Action Center. (n.d.). School Meal Eligibility and Reimbursements. Retrieved from <https://frac.org/school-meal-eligibility-reimbursements>.

Education and Workforce Committee, the reconciliation process is still ongoing and cuts to school meal programs and/or changes to the CEP could be incorporated during another part of the process.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, cuts to Medicaid and SNAP, which assists one in five children in the U.S.,<sup>16</sup> have frequently been floated during the reconciliation process. While the U.S. House's Energy and Commerce Committee (which has jurisdiction over Medicaid) and Agriculture Committee (which has jurisdiction over SNAP) have not proposed or passed their recommended cuts, cuts are expected to be put forward in order to meet the spending reduction levels targeted by congressional Republicans.

Although the exact dollar figure of cuts to Medicaid and SNAP is unknown at this time, significant reductions to these programs would have severe, adverse effects and reverse years of progress made through the USDA's modernization of school meal programs by significantly limiting the number of districts and schools — and therefore students — eligible for the CEP. As a result, the number of students facing food insecurity could increase.<sup>17</sup>

### **State Level**

During the 2024-25 school year, Connecticut districts utilized school meal programs to provide free or reduced-price meals to nearly 45% of all students enrolled in the state. This represents a 7.1% increase over the last decade.<sup>18</sup> Of the 198 school districts eligible to participate in school meal programs during the 2024-25 school year, 64 districts had at least 50% of their students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, with Jumoke Academy having the highest proportion of eligible students at approximately 97%.<sup>19</sup>

Should federal funding for school meal programs be reduced and/or student eligibility be affected by federal changes, districts across Connecticut may be impacted in a variety of ways. Districts would likely experience more students facing food insecurity. To combat this, districts may attempt to absorb cuts through local and state funding — potentially requiring cuts to other student programs and services — or take on more student lunch debt to ensure students are not going hungry throughout their school day.

School lunch debt is the cost to districts of providing unpaid lunches to students. For Connecticut school districts in 2024, school lunch debt was estimated to total at least \$862,000, according to a survey conducted by the School Nutrition Association of Connecticut that included responses from 73 of the 169 districts participating in the National School Lunch Program.<sup>20</sup> This survey showed that 43% of districts that responded reported increases in school meal debt at the start of the school year, and an average debt per district of \$11,981.<sup>21</sup> By the end of the 2024-25 school year, the average school lunch debt for a Connecticut district is estimated to climb to \$18,600.<sup>22</sup>

To address the uncertainty at the federal level and prevent greater food insecurity among students, several proposals have been raised before the Connecticut General Assembly during the 2025 legislative session that aim to further support school meals for students. Below are some of the proposals that have been put forth:

- The budget proposed and passed by the legislature's Appropriations Committee would allocate an additional \$700,000 in fiscal years 2026 and 2027 to provide free

meals to all students who qualify for reduced-price meals.<sup>23</sup> The Committee's budget is awaiting further action.

- Gov. Ned Lamont's proposed biennial state budget would maintain the same funding amount for school meal programs in FY 2026, but would increase funding by approximately \$13.1 million in FY 2027 to offer universal free breakfast, as well as free lunch for students who qualify for reduced-price meals.<sup>24</sup>
- The Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee proposed and passed H.B. 7273 (An Act Imposing a Tax on Certain Sweetened Beverages, Syrups and Powders and Dedicating the Revenue Generated to a Universal Free Meals Program), which would impose a tax on certain sweetened beverages, syrups, and powders with the intent to fund a universal free school meals program for all public school students.<sup>25</sup> This bill is awaiting further action in the House of Representatives.
- The legislature's Committee on Children also proposed and passed a bill (S.B. 1217: An Act Providing School Meals to All Students) that would provide free school meals to all Connecticut public school students. The bill was referred to the Appropriations Committee where it did not move forward.<sup>26</sup>

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Connecticut Foodshare. (n.d.). Hunger in Connecticut. Retrieved from <https://www.ctfoodshare.org/hunger-in-ct>.
- <sup>2</sup> Food Research & Action Center. (2021). *School Meals are Essential for Student Health and Learning*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from [https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning\\_FNL.pdf](https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning_FNL.pdf).
- <sup>3</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). School Nutrition Program. Retrieved from <https://portal.ct.gov/sde/nutrition/school-nutrition-programs>.
- <sup>4</sup> Food Research & Action Center. (n.d.). School Meal Eligibility and Reimbursements. Retrieved from <https://frac.org/school-meal-eligibility-reimbursements>.
- <sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2025, March 13). Income Eligibility Guidelines. Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/schoolmeals/income-eligibility-guidelines>.
- <sup>6</sup> Food Research & Action Center. (n.d.). School Meal Eligibility and Reimbursements. Retrieved from <https://frac.org/school-meal-eligibility-reimbursements>.
- <sup>7</sup> Child Nutrition Programs: Income Eligibility Guidelines, 90 Fed. Reg. 11,938 (March 13, 2025).
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- <sup>9</sup> Child Nutrition Programs: Income Eligibility Guidelines, 90 Fed. Reg. 11,938 (March 13, 2025).
- <sup>10</sup> Food and Nutrition Services. (2024, June 13). Community Eligibility Provision. Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/cep>.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, Pub. L. No. 111-296, § 104, 124 Stat. 3193, 3194-3201 (2010).
- <sup>13</sup> Feeding America. (n.d.). Child hunger keeps kids from reaching their full potential. Retrieved from <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/child-hunger-facts>.
- <sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2025, January 29). Updates to School Nutrition Standards. Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/school-nutrition-standards-updates>.
- <sup>15</sup> Hayes, C. (2025, May 2). Budget Reconciliation Update: Cuts to SNAP are Cuts to School Meals. *Food Research & Action Center*. Retrieved from <https://frac.org/blog/budget-reconciliation-update-cuts-to-snap-are-cuts-to-school-meals>.
- <sup>16</sup> Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. (2025, March 12). 2025 Budget Stakes: Proposals Would Reduce Children's Access to School Meals and Other Food Assistance. Retrieved from <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/2025-budget-stakes-proposals-would-reduce-childrens-access-to-school-meals>.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education. (n.d.). EdSight: Free and Reduced-Price Meal Eligibility, 2024-25. Retrieved from <https://public-edsight.ct.gov/students/enrollment-dashboard/free-and-reduced-price-meal-eligibility-export>.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Stanford, L. (2025, April 14). CT school lunch debt approaching \$1M. That threatens kids and district budgets, officials say. *Hartford Courant*. Retrieved from <https://www.courant.com/2025/04/14/ct-school-lunch-debt-approaching-1m-threatens-kids-district-budgets-officials-say/>.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Sokoloff, N. (2025, May 3). 'A losing battle': Connecticut school lunch debt grows so large one former teacher turns to GoFundMe. *Connecticut Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.ctpost.com/news/education/article/school-meal-debt-rising-ct-gofundme-cuts-lunches-20275005.php>.
- <sup>23</sup> Connecticut General Assembly, Office of Fiscal Analysis. (2025). *Appropriations Committee Budget, FY 26 & FY 27*. Hartford, CT: Author. Retrieved from [https://www.cga.ct.gov/ofa/Documents/year/APPJF/2025APPJF-20250422\\_Appropriations%20Committee%20Budget%20FY%2026%20-%20FY%2027.pdf](https://www.cga.ct.gov/ofa/Documents/year/APPJF/2025APPJF-20250422_Appropriations%20Committee%20Budget%20FY%2026%20-%20FY%2027.pdf).
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- <sup>25</sup> H.B. 7273: An Act Imposing a Tax on Certain Sweetened Beverages, Syrups and Powders and Dedicating the Revenue Generated to a Universal Free Meals Program. Gen. Assembly. (Ct. 2025). <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2025/TOB/H/PDF/2025HB-07273-R00-HB.PDF>.
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