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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

***House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing***

Universal School Meals  
Wednesday, Jan. 14, 2026 | 5 p.m.  
Representative Nate Davidson

**OPENING REMARKS**

5:00 p.m. Rep. Nate Davidson, D-Dauphin, Cumberland

**PANEL ONE**

5:05 p.m. Ashleigh Reedy, Alumna  
*Conrad Weiser High School*

Jeff Ney, Vice President  
*Pennsylvania State Education Association*  
***Q & A with Legislators***

**PANEL TWO**

5:30 p.m. Ryan Argot, Ed.D, Director of Federal Programs  
*West Shore School District*

Nicole Melia, Food Service Director  
*Norristown School District*  
***Q & A with Legislators***

**PANEL THREE**

5:55 p.m. Meg Bruening, Professor of Nutritional Sciences  
*Penn State College of Health and Human Development*

Lisa Quigley, Director of Solving Hunger  
*Tusk Philanthropies*  
***Q & A with Legislators***

## Ashleigh Reedy

Jan. 14, 2026, Policy Committee, Universal School Meals

### **Experiences with food insecurity, and how it affected school life**

Growing up I never knew when I was going to get another meal.

I was born in Peoria, Illinois, to parents who didn't have it all together, and most of the time we didn't have a place to live let alone food on the table. Going to school was always my safe place, but I dreaded going to breakfast and lunch knowing I didn't have the money to get food and lying to my friends that I always had big breakfasts and wasn't hungry. Going to school, I was always so hungry.

I could hardly think about anything else, and I was so tired I could hardly stay awake even on the days I got sleep. Food insecurity hinders cognitive development affecting brain development, memory and thinking. Growing up our teachers and loved ones expect us to thrive in school and prepare for our futures, but no one stops to think about how we can expect our children to thrive in school when they aren't even thriving at home or developmentally.

No matter how much studying is done or how much dedication a student has, if their bodies don't have enough fuel then they cannot reach the expectations that are put on them. I used to spend hours at night sitting and studying wondering why I wasn't smart enough, but I could never retain the information. On top of struggling in academics I started suffering from a lot of what everyone thought was just depression, anxiety and ADHD at a very early age.

Food insecurity severely impacts mental health, causing chronic stress, anxiety, and depression due to the constant worry about food, leading to impaired concentration, mood swings, and even suicidal thoughts in severe cases, with children being especially vulnerable as inconsistent nutrition disrupts brain development and increases feelings of unsafety. Poor mental health also leads to poor attendance, cognitive function, behavior, learning

and social behavior. This was another area of my life that left me greatly impacted and set me even further behind in school.

Students from food-insecure homes are more likely to miss school and exhibit behavioral problems, even further impacting their development. I was getting a ton of attendance letters, constantly stressing over food and my grades while I was also studying and trying to stay awake all the time so I could be like my peers but was still seeming to get nowhere. I was always told I was a troubled kid, and that I needed IEP's and behavior plans but did not understand that I was struggling with food because adolescents often feel shame about food insecurity and hide their struggles, making it harder for school staff to identify and help them.

I also always tried extra hard to hide my food struggles out of fear of bullying from the other people in my school. I was so ashamed that I didn't have money and couldn't even afford food but also knew there was nothing that I could do about it. On my 14th Birthday, I started my first job and had also gone into foster care shortly after where I no longer faced food insecurity. However, the effects are long term and have followed me into early adulthood, even suffering affects now. It had caused eating disorders where I would not eat for long periods of time because I no longer would feel hungry, and when I had food or snacks I was so scared of losing them that I would binge eat it all at once causing further damage to my body and yet again impacting my school performance.

The stress from food insecurity is long lasting, making children more impulsive and being a big cause of behavioral problems. Without proper nutrition kids can't properly develop, and this leads to a cycle of poor mental health, attendance, bad grades and an overall decline in their outcomes. A lot of studies show that between 23-40 percent of students are facing food insecurity, which is a higher percentage than previous years and yet we wonder why mental health problems are rapidly rising. There are many students dropping out or barely passing and overall, the upcoming generations are not thriving as well as people expect them to. Children are the world's most valuable and vulnerable generation, and it is our job to protect them.

I believe that the first and easiest step we can take to protect our children and set them up for success is ensuring no child has to worry about whether they will get to have meals when they go to school.



**Testimony of the  
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Public Hearing Regarding  
Universal School Meals**

**Presented to the  
House Democratic Policy Committee  
January 14, 2026**

**By  
Jeff Ney  
PSEA Vice-President**

Good evening, Chairman Bizzarro and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee – thank you for inviting me to testify. I would also like to extend special thanks to Representative Davidson for requesting this hearing and for elevating this critically important issue. My name is Jeff Ney, and I serve as vice president of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). On behalf of our 177,000 members, thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective on how food insecurity affects student learning and overall well-being.

I come before you tonight both as an educator with more than two decades in the classroom and as a representative of PSEA’s diverse membership. While our members come from different communities and backgrounds, we are united by our shared values. We chose careers in education because we believe *every student* deserves the opportunity to succeed—and that requires more than strong instruction alone. It requires meeting students’ basic needs, including consistent access to nutritious food.

This brings me to a reality every educator knows all too well: a hungry child cannot learn to their full potential. This is not an abstract concept or a talking point—it is the lived experience of students and the educators who support them across Pennsylvania.

### **What Educators Witness Every Day**

Research clearly shows that students experiencing food insecurity have higher rates of absenteeism, lower academic performance, and greater difficulty regulating emotions and behavior. But educators do not need studies to understand these impacts—we see the impact every day in our classrooms and schools.

We see it in the student who cannot concentrate because her stomach aches from hunger; in the child who becomes irritable or withdrawn because he has not eaten since the day before; and in the older student who struggles to stay awake because he gave the last of the food at home to his younger siblings. Sadly, these are not rare or isolated moments, they are recurring realities.

As educators, we are constantly reading nonverbal cues to understand what students need to fully engage in learning. Any teacher can tell the moment a child walks through the door when something is not right. When a student comes to school hungry, that hunger—and how to relieve it—dominates their attention before instruction even begins.

When students lack consistent access to food, their ability to self-regulate and engage in learning is compromised from the outset. Hunger undermines concentration, memory, and emotional stability. It can cause students to become agitated, withdrawn, or disruptive—behaviors that are too often treated as disciplinary issues rather than signs of unmet basic needs. For students who already require additional behavioral or emotional support, hunger compounds these challenges and can intensify negative outcomes at school.

Children need reliable, nutritious food to focus, manage emotions, and learn. Without it, even the strongest instruction cannot fully reach them. During my 20 years teaching and coaching in the Wilkes-Barre Area School District, I saw firsthand how profoundly hunger affects a child's ability to learn.

I also saw how transformative it is when students are fed, focused, and ready to learn.

### **Why School Meals Matter**

Food insecurity remains a significant barrier to student success in Pennsylvania. Universal school meals are among the most direct, effective, and immediate interventions we can make to improve student outcomes. For many students, school is the most reliable source of food they have—and often the healthiest and most complete meal they will eat that day.

School meals provide nutritional consistency to students that many families, especially those living just above federal income thresholds, struggle to maintain amid rising food costs and wages that have not kept pace.

School meals are not a peripheral service—they are foundational for student success.

### **Federal Changes Undermine Student Learning**

Federal food assistance programs play a critical role in enabling schools to provide free meals to students. Universal school meals promote stability, eliminate stigma, reduce administrative burdens, and allow school staff to focus on students rather than paperwork and meal debt collection. They also ease financial stress for families—particularly those who earn just above eligibility cutoffs.

Unfortunately, instead of strengthening these programs, President Trump and Congressional Republicans enacted the **largest cut ever** to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to help fund making tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans permanent as part of the OBBBA/reconciliation bill adopted in July.

For the first time ever, states will be required to pay a share of SNAP benefits. In addition, OBBBA increases states' share of administrative costs from 50 to 75 percent. This dramatic cost shift will strain already tight state budgets, weaken the capacity to serve families, and reduce access to food for millions of people.

The harmful policies enacted in OBBBA create a dangerous domino effect across Pennsylvania. Shifting eligibility and coverage for SNAP will cause many families to lose benefits. As families lose SNAP or Medicaid, fewer children will be automatically eligible for free school meals. That, in turn, makes fewer schools eligible for the Community Eligibility Provision, which allows high-need schools to provide free meals for all students. Schools face increased administrative strain and paperwork to serve students, at a time when staffing

shortages are already severe. When eligibility becomes more complicated, students are more likely to slip through the cracks and go hungry.

### **What Pennsylvania Can Do**

While the Commonwealth cannot control these federal policy shifts, we can and must mitigate their impact. State-level action can protect students, families, and schools from disruption and ensure stability regardless of changes in Washington.

PSEA applauds Governor Shapiro for expanding universal breakfast and advocating for universal lunch and other food security initiatives. Under Governor Shapiro’s leadership, Pennsylvania’s universal free breakfast program has already led to increased student participation statewide, particularly among students who previously did not qualify under federal income thresholds. Schools also report smoother starts to the school day, fewer nurse visits due to hunger, and improved student readiness to learn. However, lunch remains governed by outdated federal income thresholds that fail to reflect today’s economic realities. As a result, thousands of students still come to school each day without reliable access to a nutritious midday meal.

PSEA commends Representatives Kinkead, Davidson, and Kahn for sponsoring House Bill 180, legislation that seeks to address these gaps. HB 180 would establish a state fund to provide school lunches for all students, including those not covered under existing federal programs. This legislation, together with Governor Shapiro’s leadership advocating for expanded funding and access to food assistance programs, reflects Pennsylvania’s commitment to building a comprehensive school nutrition system that supports every student in every community.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue and for your continued commitment to students and public education. I am happy to answer any questions.

## Opening Remarks from Dr. Ryan Argot—House Policy Committee

Good evening and thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. It is an honor to be here today to talk to you about the implications of school food service debt. Before I get into those details it is probably useful for me to share several details about my responsibilities. I am the Director of Federal Programs for West Shore School District and in that role, two of my primary responsibilities are serving as both the Food Service Director and the Board Secretary. Much of what I say today will be based on my experience in those two positions. I am also the President of the South Central Association of School Food Service Directors, the founder of the Hampden Hunger Heroes, and one of Hampden Township's Commissioners.

School Food Service Programs are singularly unique in that they are running a business within a school districts. While there are federal and state subsidies to help offset significant percentages of our expenses, food service programs are expected to raise our own funds through the sale of meals and snacks. These sales are expected to pay for the food we sell, equipment purchases/repairs, the salary of our kitchen staff and in some places, even utilities. I know of no other school department expected to be self-sustaining. Public schools to provide teachers, books and instruction at no cost, but lunch is still sold in many schools.

During COVID the United States fed all children for free, both breakfast and lunch, then coming out of COVID Pennsylvania transitioned to providing free breakfasts. I am thankful our commonwealth is making sure children get free breakfasts. However, food service departments continue to face challenges. Breakfast has always been a smaller meal and provides smaller reimbursements. With the increased numbers of breakfasts provided we have had to increase the number of work hours per day. Getting employees who are available to work these early morning hours for part time work is tricky, but that is conversation for another day.

The goal today is to look at what happens with student lunch debt. Pennsylvania has gone back to allowing districts to provide alternative meals to families with significant debt. West Shore School District is committed to feeding hungry children. If a student comes to West Shore's cafeteria and wants a meal cafeteria staff will feed them a federally compliant lunch with fruits, vegetables, grain, dairy, and protein as part of the menu offering. These meals are provided regardless of whether parents are able or willing to pay for the meals. The law even forbids lunch staff from letting students know if their accounts are negative.

What happens with the debt? That is going to vary some from district to district, but I can tell you what happens in West Shore. Usually twice per week families get an automated

call and email asking them to pay their child's food service account. Sometimes it is as simple as parents forgetting to write a check or their child left it in a backpack. No stress. Other times, parents can't or won't pay, but don't qualify for free meals. So what happens....West Shore keeps feeding their kids and the calls keep going. Sometimes I am fortunate enough to get a donation to cover some of the negative balances. Generally, these donations don't cover everything. Still, we keep feeding the children.

At the end of the school year, the calls switch from robo calls to my voice when I provide a reminder that the student meal account needs to be paid off or it will become a formal obligation.

As we transition from the end of the school year into summer, obligations from various departments may be turned over to the Board Secretary. At that point, I take all of the student obligations (mostly food service and technology related), send a letter giving one more deadline before turning the debt over to a debt collection agency. Of note, because the food service account deposits are all considered federal funds the account must be made whole. So, when the food service account turns over its obligation list to the Board Secretary it does so with a bill to the general fund. That's right, if there is \$30,000 in student food debt at the end of the school year the district is on the hook for it. Then, if money comes in from the debt collector it goes back to the general fund.

At the beginning of the next school year, all of the negative balances are invisible within the food service account system, even as debt collection letters roll out and the cycle begins again.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think feeding children is important and I am pleased we will not turn a hungry child away, but it is 2025. As an individual, it is challenging to sell food to children that runs their accounts into the negative, knowing they receive textbooks, bus rides, and more during the school year. During COVID the entire county fed children for free. Further, where poverty is high enough, schools and other nonprofits are able to feed children for free. Whether at the federal or state level, I think the time has come to do away with school lunch debt by making free school lunches a student right, funded sufficiently with state or federal tax dollars to avoid forcing school districts to operate lunch programs as businesses and debt collection agencies.

I will gladly answer your questions as best as I am able, but I believe we have another speaker first.

End of school year debt numbers

2025	\$0—CEP was unsustainable
2024	\$14,586—partial CEP
2023	\$26,580
2022	\$0
2021	\$0
2020	\$15,351
2019	\$20,540
2018	\$11,324
2017	\$3,938—NO DEBT COLLECTOR

*Act 55 of 2017 banned lunch shaming in PA. In 2019 PA School Code revision allows lunch shaming again for those over \$50.*



## Written Testimony on the Value of School Meals

**Submitted by:** Nicole Melia, MS, RD, LDN  
Food Service Director, Norristown Area School District  
Registered Dietitian & School Nutrition Leader

Chairman, Chairwoman, and Members of the Pennsylvania House,

Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony on the importance of school meals and the critical role school nutrition programs play in supporting student health, learning, and long-term positive health outcomes.

As a Registered Dietitian and school food service director with more than 15 years of experience in Pennsylvania public schools, I can say with confidence that today's school meals are fundamentally different from outdated perceptions. School meals are built on science-based nutrition standards, continuous oversight, and a commitment to teaching students how to eat well to improve health outcomes later in life—not simply feeding them for the day.<sup>1</sup>

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is uniquely designed to improve nutrition outcomes at a population level, not just on an individual basis. Unlike many nutrition interventions that rely on voluntary participation, education alone, or individual behavior change, the NSLP reaches children consistently, every school day, and during critical years of growth and development. This scale, consistency, and reach make the program one of the most effective public health nutrition strategies in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The NSLP establishes uniform, evidence-based nutrition standards that apply across income levels, geographic regions, and communities. By requiring fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and dairy—while limiting sodium, saturated fat, and added sugars—the program shifts the overall dietary intake of millions of children simultaneously. When healthier foods become the default option rather than the exception, population-wide dietary patterns change over time.<sup>3</sup>

The program also improves nutrition outcomes through repeated exposure, which is essential for children's food acceptance. Research consistently shows that children often need multiple exposures to a food before accepting it, this is particularly important for fruits and vegetables. The NSLP provides daily access to nutrient-dense foods, including fruits, a variety of vegetables, and whole grains that may not be routinely available at home. This repeated, normalized exposure helps reshape preferences and reduces reliance on snack foods and sweets that are not nutrient dense to satisfy hunger over time.<sup>4</sup>



The structure of the NSLP integrates accountability and continuous improvement, strengthening its public health impact. School menus are planned using nutrient analysis software, reviewed by state agencies, and evaluated through administrative and on-site reviews. This level of oversight ensures that nutrition standards are not aspirational, but operational. Few public food programs have this degree of transparency, data tracking, and corrective action built into their design.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, the NSLP functions as both a nutrition safety net and an educational tool. Children learn what a balanced meal looks like by seeing it served every day. Portion sizes, food group balance, and meal composition become familiar and expected. Over time, this consistency helps students internalize what “normal” eating looks like, influencing food choices beyond the cafeteria and into adulthood.<sup>6</sup>

In short, the National School Lunch Program is not simply a meal service. It is a large-scale, evidence-based public health intervention that improves dietary quality, reduces inequities, and shapes lifelong eating behaviors. Its design—universal standards, daily reach, accountability, and education—allows it to positively influence nutrition outcomes across entire communities and generations.<sup>7</sup>

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## Footnotes

1. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. *National School Lunch Program: Nutrition Standards*.
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4. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Nutrition Evidence Systematic Review. *Repeated Exposure and Food Acceptance in Children*.
5. U.S. Government Accountability Office. *School Meal Programs: Oversight and Accountability*.
6. Schwartz MB et al. *Impact of school meals on overall diet quality*. Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.
7. Kenney EL, Long MW, Barrett JL, et al. *Impact of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act on obesity trends*. JAMA Pediatrics. 2020.

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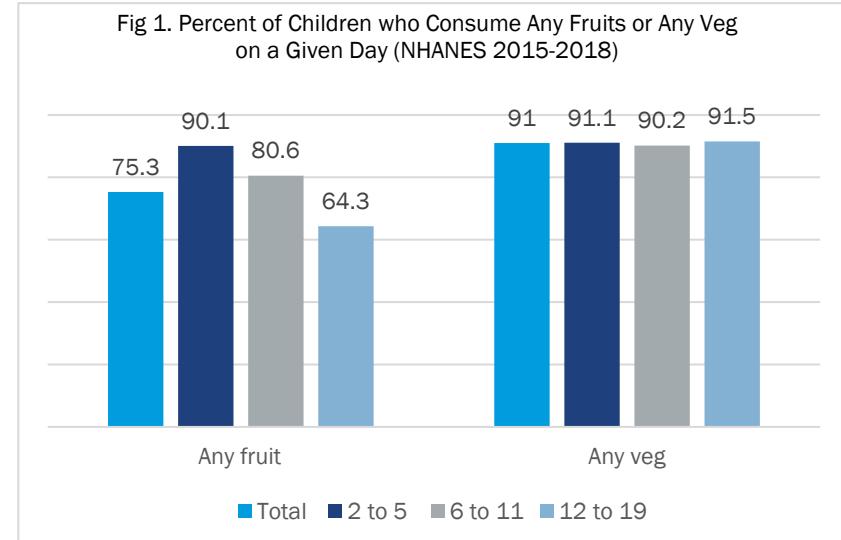


Thank you, Chairman Bizzarro, Representative Davidson, and other members of the Policy Committee Hearing on Universal School Meals or this opportunity and honor to speak with you today. My name is Dr. Meg Bruening. In my day job, I am a Professor and Department Head of the Department of Nutritional Sciences at The Pennsylvania State University. My research focuses on the food and nutrition security of underserved youth and families—much of my work is done in schools. I have lived and conducted school nutrition research in Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Arizona. Today, I am speaking as an individual citizen, and my comments are not representative of the viewpoints of The Pennsylvania State University nor any of the granting agencies who have previously and currently provided my research funding.

The school meals program in the US is a critical safety net providing almost 30 million children with school meals each year, with an increase of 1M more children served breakfast and lunch in 2024 as compared to 2023.<sup>1</sup> School meals are available for any school in the US and reaches approximately 60% of all American youth.<sup>1</sup> In Pennsylvania, over 1M children participate in free/reduced priced meals, representing >3.3% of the meals nationally. School meals programs are aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, ensuring a variety of healthy foods are offered to children while at school,<sup>2</sup> where children spend most of their waking (and eating) hours.

As I am sure you are aware, very few children meet dietary recommendations.<sup>3</sup> In fact, only 1 out of 10 children meet recommendations for the intake of fruits and vegetables.<sup>4,5</sup> Consumption of fruits and vegetables—foods with important nutrients needed for physical and emotional growth and well-being, decrease as children age. By the time kids are in middle and high school, ~43% report not consuming any fruits or vegetables on a given day. None—not even 100% fruit juice or French fries, resulting in the loss of the consumption of critical nutrition.

School meals help to buffer the tendency of low fruit and vegetable consumption and school meals are consistently linked to improved dietary patterns for kids, especially since 2012.<sup>6-8</sup> In addition, school meals are important in fending off food insecurity for our most vulnerable children. School meals ensure that kids get the right amounts of the right types of foods for their growth and development during the school day. More participation in school meals leads to better intake.

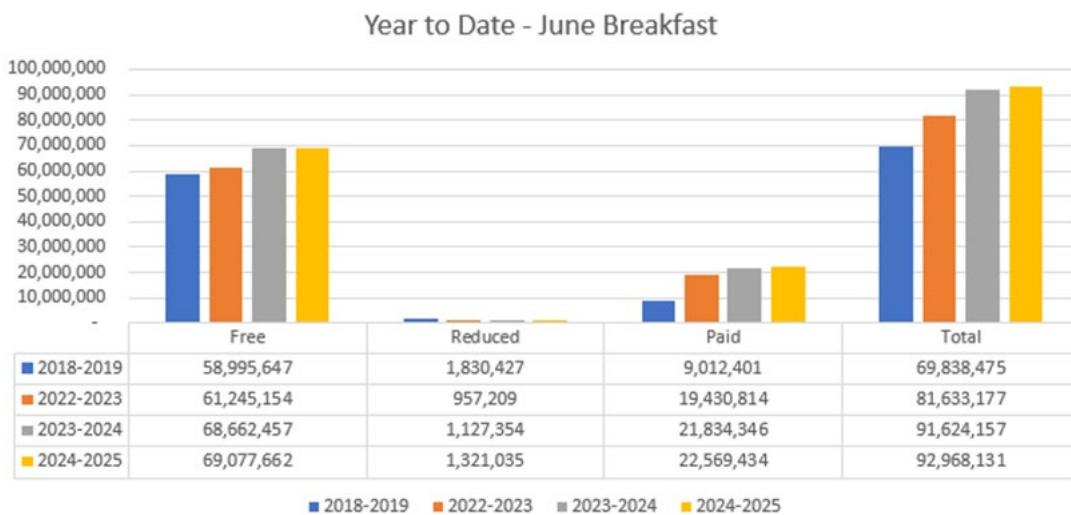


Research shows us that food and nutrition security, including consuming healthy dietary patterns and diets rich in fruits and vegetables is linked with student outcomes and student cognition.<sup>9-12</sup> For example, a study by Anderson et al. found that school lunch quality was linked to higher scores in achievement tests, especially for those participating in free and reduced-priced meals.<sup>13</sup> A study from South Carolina found that meals for all were linked to slightly higher test scores for elementary and middle school students—although only statistically significant for elementary student scores.<sup>14</sup> Another study, this time from New York, found that universal school meals significantly increased math and English language arts scores for middle schoolers.<sup>15</sup> The research on linking student attendance and more long-term academic outcomes is needed.<sup>16</sup> So much of this research is

focused on elementary students; much more research is needed for students of all ages. We are in the early phases of working on some of this data collection with schools in Pennsylvania.

Therefore, Universal school meals and the Community Eligibility Program are critical mechanism in which all students are offered free meals at school regardless of family income or eligibility status. Two years ago, in Pennsylvania, with funding support from the Governor, the Commonwealth provided Universal Breakfast to all students. The Pennsylvania Department of Education's data indicates that that program led to a 13% increase in participation over 2 years, and 1.3 million more breakfast last year alone (see Fig 2).

Fig. 2. Pennsylvania Breakfast Participation Rates 2018-2025



Furthermore, research published just last week has shown that participation in school meals was related to improved health outcomes. Specifically, colleagues at the University of Washington examined medical records of children who were in school districts who had the Community Eligibility Provision as compared to those with standard meal programs.<sup>17</sup> This study included over 1000 schools and 155,000 over 12 states. They found that the youth who went to schools with CEP had a reduction in the proportion with a high blood pressure measurement. We don't know if these youth even participated in school meals, although it is likely, but being in the school alone with universal school meals, was related to improved biological health outcomes. A 2021 systematic review examined the impact of Universal School Meals had on children's well-being. The review reported that evidence for improvements in diet quality and academic performance when universal free school meal provisions included lunch, and some, but not all studies showed a relationship between Universal school meals and attendance. Universal school meals was linked with improvements in food security, and no adverse relationships with Body Mass Index. The evidence is overwhelmingly positive in support of Universal School Meals. Children in Pennsylvania are already benefiting from Universal Breakfast, I wonder what improvements we would see with Universal Lunch.

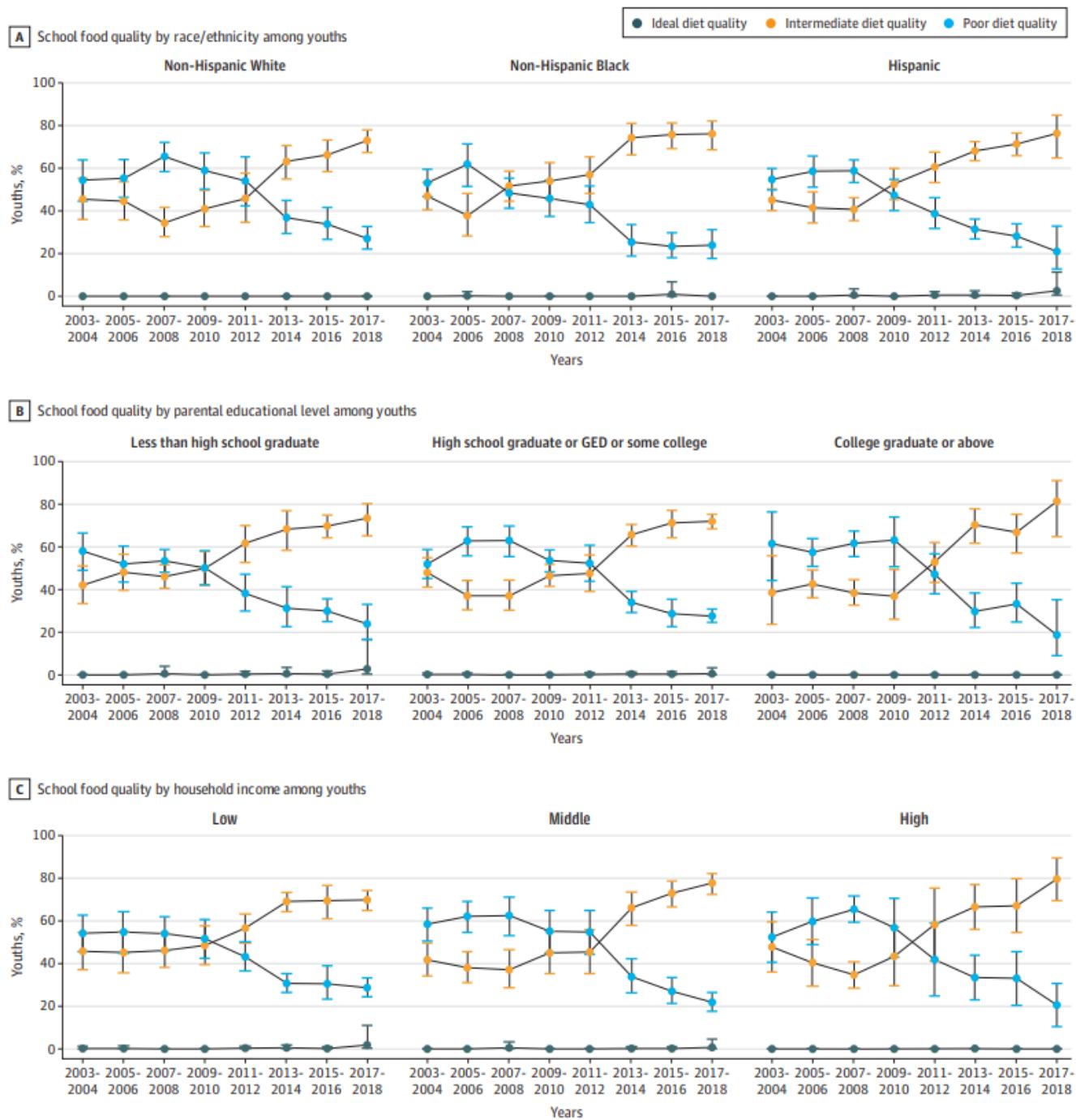
In sum, good research shows that school meals, including universal school meals, are linked to better health outcomes. Universal school meals help to ensure that all kids consistently have access to the strongest nutrition possible. People like myself are eager to help evaluate the best strategies to make the most of the state and federal dollars invested in school meals that support all kids. I can't leave today without acknowledging the heroic efforts of school food service directors and school meal workers to feed our children. I am in constant awe of their work. Thank you for your attention to these issues and the opportunity to speak with you today. I am happy to answer any questions.

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## Supplemental material

**Figure 1. Trends in school food quality (ideal, intermediate, poor) by sociodemographics, 2003-2018**  
 From: Liu J, Micha R, Li Y, Mozaffarian D. Trends in food sources and diet quality among US children and adults, 2003-2018. JAMA Network Open. 2021 Apr 1;4(4):e215262-.



Testimony of Lisa Quigley, Director, Solving Hunger, Tusk Philanthropies

**Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing**  
**January 14, 2026**

**Universal School Meals**

Good evening. My name is Lisa Quigley, and I direct *Solving Hunger*, a project of Tusk Philanthropies. We are dedicated to ending child hunger.

I want to thank Rep. Davidson, Chairman Bizzarro, and Rep. Kinkead for inviting me to participate today.

*Solving Hunger* has worked in Pennsylvania because of your state's decision, four years ago, to fund universal school breakfast under former Governor Tom Wolf. That commitment to offering school breakfast to every child has continued under Governor Shapiro's administration, and that should be applauded. However, efforts to *expand* meals to include lunch have been hampered in two ways: The Governor's decision to not make it a priority and recommend the funding in his budget, and the absence of any funding support from Republicans in the legislature. Both are needed. Child hunger is bipartisan. The solution should be as well.

Fortunately, the members who are here today have been longtime supporters of school meal expansion, and it's because of your ongoing commitment and leadership that Pennsylvania kids are guaranteed one nutritious meal a day. We join in your conviction that they need *both* breakfast and lunch. In fact, without a further investment in meals, education dollars are wasted. Hungry kids can't learn.

Other testimony today has described the need and the benefits of school meals, so I will not try to compete with Ashleigh, Jeff, Ryan and my friend Nicole. They have done an excellent job, and they are the real experts.

At *Solving Hunger*, we work across the country. We are completely bipartisan, but we bring political tactics and funding to every campaign and we have a 75% success rate. Because kids don't have lobbyists, we hire the best. Because kids can't afford pollsters, we commission polls. Because kids don't have access to the media, we provide a media budget. We work with Democrats and Republicans, Governors and legislative leaders to pass legislation to expand meals to kids.

My purpose today is to:

- Describe what is happening in other states.
- Argue how changes at the federal government could make child hunger worse; and
- Explain what we know about Pennsylvanians' support for universal school meals.

**First, there is momentum around the country for universal school meals**, and Pennsylvania is *behind* other states. In 10 states -- Michigan, California, Colorado, New York, Vermont, New Mexico, Minnesota, Massachusetts, and Maine -- kids are offered breakfast *and* lunch for free. Attendance, test scores, behavior, graduation rates, and happiness all increase when children are well-nourished. Their families are saving \$1,200-\$1,500 per year per child, so school meals are also an answer to the affordability problem facing families today. 14 million kids have access to two meals a day at school around the country. Why not in Pennsylvania, where one in six kids are hungry?

While behind on lunch, Pennsylvania has helped lead the way on breakfast-only offerings, where two more states have joined them. Last year, we worked with state governments in Delaware and Arkansas – two states that couldn't be more different politically – and passed funding for universal school breakfast. Two days ago, Gov. Henry McMaster of South Carolina, released his executive budget recommendations, which includes funding for universal breakfast. The momentum is real.

To summarize in school terms: PA has a passing grade, but there is more work to do to get an "A".

**And now for what's ahead.** Since child hunger is bipartisan and demands a bipartisan solution, I am not going to offer an opinion on the new tax law. But it's undeniable that the cessation of Medicaid-expansion subsidies and the dramatic changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (or SNAP), mean that there will be fewer resources in millions of households.

Financial pressures on families have increased and they are deepening. Democrats and Republicans both cite the cost of living and inflation as their highest concerns. As these pressures persist, we should be, at the very least, trying to spare kids from as much of the fallout as possible. After all, if they come from a household that makes just \$60,000 annually, they don't qualify for federally funded free school meals. When some say that the state shouldn't be feeding "rich" kids, ask yourself if a family of four making \$60,000 is rich in Pennsylvania. The state must fill the gaps left by painfully low federal eligibility levels. And it would cost the Commonwealth ½ of 1% of its total budget.

**Finally, free school meals are very popular.** We poll it around the country, and in Pennsylvania 86% of registered Democrats, 78% of registered Republicans, and 82% of independent voters supported universal free school meals. In this poll, we *oversampled* for Republican voters. This is a subject no one is fighting over. In fact, it's unifying.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify and I look forward to questions.