



The Education Trust  
EdTrust.org  
2021

# 5 Things for Advocates to Know About Equitable School Nutrition

Access to adequate and nutritious food for students and their families is fundamental to educational equity. A critical part of reliable access to food is school meals, one of the best sources of nutritious food for students. Adequate school nutrition is [linked](#) to improved literacy and math scores, improved cognitive function, reduced absenteeism, and [long-term](#) positive educational outcomes.

Yet too many students — especially Black students, Latino students, and students from low-income backgrounds — are still experiencing food insecurity in our nation. People of color are [more likely to live in food deserts](#) and, as a result, many students do not have access to the necessary nutrition for their physical, mental, socioemotional, and academic growth. During the COVID-19 pandemic, [food insecurity among Black and Latino households with children](#) skyrocketed, leaving nearly 4 in 10 families struggling to feed their families.

As state and local leaders look to address the inequities that COVID-19 shone a spotlight on, they must provide students access to nutritious food. There are ways that advocates can help ensure that schools are maximizing their resources to feed students, and that families know about the benefits that are available. This document provides advocates with five things they should know to help ensure that all students, including students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, have access to healthy meals both in and outside of school.



## 1

### Families Can Access Many Forms of Food Assistance

During the 2021-22 school year, in response to the challenges facing families during the pandemic, [all children are eligible](#) for free school lunch and breakfast. Many families are eligible for afterschool meals as well. In addition, the [Pandemic Electronic Benefits Program](#) (P-EBT) is available to families when schools close for five consecutive days due to COVID-19 quarantining or outbreaks. Even when the current universal free meals expire, some schools and districts will remain eligible for the community eligibility provision (CEP). CEP allows schools and districts where [40% of students](#) are eligible for Free and Reduced Price Lunch to provide free breakfast and lunch to all the students in the school or district. You can find out if your school is eligible on the [Food Research & Action Center's CEP database](#). In addition, schools and districts can be critical partners in helping to connect families with other nutrition benefits including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

#### ***What Advocates Can Do:***

- ✓ Ask schools how they are communicating to families and the surrounding communities about nutrition benefits, including free lunch and breakfast
  - Look out for whether your school is also disseminating information to other community organizations (e.g., housing providers and employment assistance programs) through multiple modes and in multiple languages
- ✓ Encourage district and state officials to provide P-EBT benefits to children who are quarantining or whose classrooms are closed
- ✓ Check whether schools or districts are [eligible](#) for CEP and encourage the district to enroll
- ✓ Share this [toolkit](#) with your school and encourage to reach out to families who might be eligible for SNAP





## 2

### Summer Meals Can Reach More Kids

States are currently eligible to apply for the [Summer Electronic Benefits Program \(EBT\)](#). Summer EBT provides benefits directly to families during the summer months, which is the hungriest time of year for students who depend on school meals. [Only 13.8%](#) of the children who need nutrition assistance when school is out for summer vacation receive it. Expanding Summer EBT has been shown to [reduce food insecurity](#) by almost 30% and increase access to healthy food including fruits and vegetables. Ensuring states take advantage of Summer EBT, and that the program is permanently extended, will provide critical nutrition assistance to families while school is not in session.

#### ***What Advocates Can Do:***

- ✓ Ask your school and district how they are communicating to families about summer meal access.
  - Look out for whether your school is also disseminating information to other community organizations (e.g., housing providers and employment assistance programs) through multiple modes and in multiple languages
- ✓ Encourage your members of Congress to support permanently extending Summer EBT

## 3

### Breakfast After The Bell Increases Student Access to Breakfast

Eating breakfast has been shown to [improve](#) academic performance. However, currently many students who are eligible for free or reduced-price school breakfast at school do not participate, meaning they are starting the school day without food. This is in part because of barriers to arriving at school early enough to eat before school starts. When schools provide students with breakfast after the bell, [it increases participation](#) in breakfast. For example breakfast in the classroom increases participation to as high as [88%](#). [Other strategies](#) include Second Chance Breakfast, when students eat breakfast during a break between classes in the morning, and Grab and Go Options.

#### ***What Advocates Can Do:***

- ✓ Encourage your school to adopt breakfast after the bell policies
- ✓ Share with the district [research](#) regarding the benefits of breakfast and breakfast after the bell policies

## 4

### Local School Wellness Plans Can Engage Communities in Supporting Healthy Students

[Local School Wellness Plans](#) are meant to guide how schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program create a supportive environment that promotes students' well-being. The plans address a number of issues related to wellness, including how schools follow nutrition guidelines, encourage physical activity for students, and disseminate nutrition information about food and beverages available to students. These plans can also address the importance of local sourcing and reducing packaging and food waste. Many schools do not use these plans to their full advantage to promote the mental and physical health needs of their students.

#### ***What Advocates Can Do:***

- ✓ Participate in your district or school Wellness Committee (or start one at your school)
- ✓ Ask your school to share the goals of the Local School Wellness Plan, inquire about progress to goals, and encourage updates to the plan with community input
- ✓ Ask for time at community meetings (e.g., School Board meetings) to talk about local school wellness plans, including mental and physical health, and school nutrition





## 5

### Schools Can Create Food Inclusive Environments

School meals can contribute to creating inclusive learning environments for students — or serve to isolate or shame them. Our nutritional education and the food we serve in schools should reflect the diversity we see in schools. In addition, policies that punish children with meal debt -- known as “lunch shaming” — humiliate students as well as taking away vital access to nutritious food. While all students can access free meals, schools and districts can rethink their policies moving forward to ensure that they end lunch shaming policies. Schools also can explore participating in community eligibility in the 2022-2023 school year now. Finally, schools can also take advantage of school gardens as a way to engage the community and bring families into schools.

#### ***What Advocates Can Do:***

- ✓ Advocate for food that represents diverse cultures as part of the school lunch program and when schools host events, celebrations, or other gatherings
- ✓ Find out the district and school policy regarding lunch debt and advocate for a clear public policy that rejects school lunch shaming
- ✓ Encourage schools to start school gardens or build partnerships with existing community gardens programs like [Slow Food USA's School Garden Network](#) or [Teens for Food Justice](#)

#### ***Breakfast After the Bell***

Research shows that breakfast after the bell reduces chronic absenteeism by [up to 6%](#). Some states, such as [Oregon](#), have passed legislation requiring schools to serve breakfast after the bell at no cost to students at schools where 70% or more students qualify for Free or Reduced Price Lunch. Advocates can follow [this fact sheet](#) to start establishing a Breakfast After the Bell program in their school or district.

## Resources

- ✓ For information on nutrition programs and eligibility, call the USDA National Hunger Hotline at 1-866-3-HUNGRY (1-866-348-6479) or 1-877-8-HAMBRE (1-877-842-6273). Information is available in English and Spanish. The hotline operates Monday through Friday, 7:00 AM to 10:00 PM Eastern Time
- ✓ For more information on nutrition and education, visit <https://edtrust.org/issue/ending-student-hunger-homelessness>
- ✓ Share Our Strength's Advocacy tips can help you find information and resources <https://www.nokidhungry.org/ways-you-can-help/speak-kids>
- ✓ For information on opportunities to advocate on issues related to nutrition, check out the FRAC Action page <https://frac.org/action>
- ✓ Local School Wellness Plans Advocate Guide has information about how you get involved <http://schoolwellnesspolicies.org/lwp-advocate-guide.pdf>
- ✓ For more background on Community Eligibility, visit this guide <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Take-a-Fresh-Look-at-Community-Eligibility.pdf>

