

National School Lunch Program and the 2024 Elections



Between now and November 5th, we are running a series of 10 Q&As with NEPC Fellows about education issues relevant to the 2024 federal election. The goal of the series is to inform readers about the education-related stances of the nation's two major political parties, drawing upon the Republican and Democratic parties' national platforms and on Project 2025. Q&A participants were selected on the basis of their research expertise on the topics they have been asked to address. In addition to describing the parties' positions, each expert is providing background information, with a focus on summarizing research findings.

In today's Q&A, [Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach](#) addresses the National School Lunch Program. Schanzenbach is the Margaret Walker Alexander Professor in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University. Her areas of expertise include the economics of anti-poverty programs, food insecurity and education policy, tracing the impact of major public policies on children's long-term outcomes.

1. *From a historical perspective, why has the federal government been engaged in this issue?*

The Federal government's [engagement in this issue](#) can be traced back to 1932 and a series of New Deal investments in aid for school lunches. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was made permanent by the 1946 National School Lunch Act, which

provided assistance to states for nonprofit school-lunch programs. It was justified as a “measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation’s children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food.” From early days, the program included both cash assistance and distribution of surplus foods. During the 1950s and 1960s there was increasing participation in the NSLP, which is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service, and the funding formulas were altered several times.

A big change came in 1970 when Congress acted to establish national criteria for eligibility for free and reduced-price lunches (previously school districts made their own policies on eligibility) and reform the appropriations process for the program. The historic context leading to these changes is interesting in its own right. In April 1968, the Committee on School Lunch Participation reported that under 4 percent of school children received free or reduced-price school meals, in part because of shortcomings of local administration and financing that they summarized as “the greater the need of children from a poor neighborhood, the less the community is able to meet it.” In the same month, the report *Hunger USA* declared that there were 280 “hunger counties” in the U.S. in need of emergency assistance. The next month, the CBS documentary *Hunger in America* had a compelling scene in which a boy reported that he was “ashamed” that he did not have enough money to eat lunch at school. Senator George McGovern (D-SD) [reported](#) watching that documentary and declaring to his family, “You know, it’s not that little boy who should be ashamed, it’s George McGovern, a United States Senator, a member on the Committee on Agriculture.” McGovern worked closely with Senator Bob Dole (R-KS) over the subsequent decades combatting hunger in the U.S. and abroad, eventually jointly winning them the [2008 World Food Prize](#). According to McGovern, he and Dole “worked hand-in-glove. We didn’t play any partisan politics with this issue.”

2. *From a research perspective, how has federal government involvement been helpful or harmful to preparing students of different backgrounds to succeed in college, career and life?*

Looking historically at big expansions in access to the NSLP from 1947-73, [Hinrichs \(2010\)](#) finds a causal link to increased educational attainment, perhaps by encouraging children to attend school where they would be fed. On the other hand, he does not find impacts on health outcomes measured in adulthood.

Today, almost all public schools participate in the NLSP, so it is hard to measure the impact of having access to the program in comparison to not having access to it. The more policy-relevant variation today comes from expansions in access to free school lunches, especially through school- or district-wide universal free meal programs. These studies generally find substantial increases in participation in school lunch when it is made free of charge, and there is also evidence of improved educational outcomes including [math scores](#) and school [suspension rates](#).

3. *Based on your own research expertise, how (if at all) should the federal role on this*

issue shift? What is the justification for those recommendations?

The most salient current issue is for whom school meals should be free of charge. School meals were temporarily made universally free during the COVID-19 pandemic, and several states (California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico and Vermont) have passed laws to use state funds to make meals universally free.

Under [standard rules](#), individual students are determined to be eligible for free meals if their family income is at or below 130% of the federal poverty threshold. Students are eligible for reduced-price meals if their family income is between 130% and 185% of the poverty threshold. Students automatically qualify for free meals if their family receives benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations. Foster, homeless, migrant, and runaway children also receive free meals. Schools generally collect and process applications for free or reduced-price meals and manage collection of payments.

For more than a decade, schools and school districts have been able to provide free school meals to all children if they have adopted the [Community Eligibility Provision](#) (CEP). To be eligible for CEP, at least one-quarter of children must be identified as automatically eligible for free meals due to benefit receipt. The federal government reimburses meals based on a formula that is a function of the share of students who are automatically eligible for free meals, and other state or local funds must be used to pay for any remaining meal costs. CEP reduces paperwork for households and schools to demonstrate eligibility among individual students, eliminates stigma associated with receiving free meals, and ends the need to collect money for meals from individual students (and in doing so also ends [school meal debt](#)).

In my opinion, the basic structure of CEP is good policy. It streamlines school meal program administration in places where need is high, and by using relevant information gathered to determine eligibility for other programs also improves the accuracy of program targeting. (When schools collect applications, that often comes with a [high error rate](#)). Depending on policy goals, various parameters of CEP could be altered. For example, among schools or districts that are eligible for CEP, those with a higher share of students who are automatically eligible for free meals are more likely to participate. We could induce a higher (or lower) participation rate if the reimbursement formula were altered to make it more (or less) generous. Currently, CEP can be adopted by individual schools, entire districts, or groups of schools within the district. (Note that some states have very large, heterogeneous districts—for example, districts are county-wide in the state of Florida—while others have smaller, more homogeneous districts).

- 4. Please briefly explain how Project 2025, the RNC national platform and the DNC national platform address this issue. (If this issue is not addressed by Project 2025, the RNC platform, or the DNC platform, please note that.)*

While school meals are not included in either the DNC or the RNC national platform, the parties differ widely in who should receive free school meals.

As Governor of Minnesota, Vice Presidential candidate Tim Walz signed a law providing universal free school meals to school children in the state, with needed additional funding to cover the costs coming from the state. He raises this fact in most of his policy speeches.

Project 2025 advocates returning to individual eligibility for free or reduced-price meals based on family income. It includes a call to eliminate CEP altogether, which would take an act of Congress. Short of that, it recommends changing CEP rules so that only schools or entire districts, but not groups of schools within a district, can qualify for the program. It also calls to “reject efforts to create universal free school meals.”

5. *What is your response to the ways in which this issue is addressed by Project 2025, the RNC national platform and the DNC national platform, based on your knowledge of the research in this area?*

While it is vitally important that students have access to nutritious school meals, reasonable people can surely disagree about to what extent these meals should be paid for by government sources. Both sides agree that low-income children should receive free meals, and the disagreement boils down to under what circumstances should all meals in a school be free. I am surprised that Project 2025 appears to see little benefit from the administrative streamlining of school meals programs, and instead of calling for a more targeted CEP it wants to eliminate it entirely. On the other hand, I am also surprised by the growing calls among Democrats for universal free meals even at the lowest-poverty schools when there are many other targeted ways to spend those funds. In my opinion, the current system based on CEP works well, with interested states choosing to supplement these funds to make meals universally free.

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