

Your Question:

You asked for information on which states have implemented universal school meals and whether any have incorporated funding mechanisms for parents who are willing and able to contribute.

Our Response:

While several states allow districts with the highest poverty rates to offer free meals to all students through the [Community Eligibility Provision](#), a scan of current [state policies](#) did not reveal any states that provide universal free school meals to all schools, regardless of poverty level. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, [federal waivers](#) and funding allowed states to provide these more universal programs, however, it is unclear how or whether states plan to sustain these efforts.

Parental donations or contributions to school meal programs are often tied to broader provisions around receiving funds to off-set school meal debt. In recent years, states have passed legislation allowing for these types of contributions as well as eliminating copays for reduced-price meals. Below, please find general information on universal school meal programs, state policy trends related to funding as well as additional resources for your review.

Universal School Meals

[Research](#) indicates that universal meals increase participation in school meal programs. Typically, providing universal access involves expanding access to the National School Lunch Program. The [community eligibility provision](#) of the National School Lunch Program allows schools and districts with the highest poverty rates to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all students without collecting household applications. [Virginia](#) and [Washington](#) have both recently passed legislation to require or expand participation in CEP. Additionally, schools have been offering free meals to students through [special-needs provisions](#) (e.g., [Provisions 1, 2, and 3](#), which are procedures for determining eligibility for free and reduced price meals) designed to increase participation in schools with the highest poverty rates. Most often, schools use Provision 2 to offer free meals to students, but schools are still required to obtain school meal applications during the first year of the program to establish a base count — which is then used to determine reimbursement for the following years.

State Policies Related to Funding

In recent years, state policies related to student nutrition have largely focused on lunch-shaming, COVID-19 flexibilities and farm-to-school programs. In addition, there have been a few bills passed related to funding for school meals which either allow outside donations for offsetting school meal debt or eliminate copays for reduced priced meals.

Outside donations/contributions:

Recently, some states have enacted legislation allowing for donations to offset school meal debt. Rather than allowing for parental donation or contribution to school meal programs broadly, these provisions often exist within the context of prohibitions on lunch-shaming and school meal debt relief bills.

- [Connecticut SB 2](#) (2021) allows local or regional boards of education to accept gifts, donations or grants for the purpose of paying unpaid meal charges.
- [Virginia HB 703](#) (2020) allows school boards to solicit and receive donations or other funds for the purpose of eliminating or offsetting any school meal debt.

Eliminating copays for reduced-price meals:

Some states have taken action to eliminate copays for reduced-price meals. The School Nutrition Association advocates for the elimination of the reduced-price category writ large in this [position paper](#), citing research on the accumulation of debt and the underutilization of the program.

- **Colorado:** [State Funding for Reduced Price Meals](#): Through the Start Smart Nutrition Program and the Child Nutrition School Lunch Protection Act, the state provides funding to eliminate the reduced-price fees paid by families for meals. The Start Smart Nutrition Program eliminates the \$0.30 copayment for reduced-price breakfast paid by families of students in all grades and prohibits schools from charging reduced-price eligible students for breakfast. The Child Nutrition School Lunch Protection Act eliminates the \$0.40 copayment for reduced-price lunch paid by families of students in all grades. Beginning with the 2019-20 school year, the act prohibits schools from charging reduced-price eligible students for lunch.
- **Maryland:** The state's [Subsidized and Free Feeding Program](#) is phasing in funding beginning in the 2019-20 school year to eliminate the \$0.30 fee for reduced-price breakfast and \$0.40 fee for reduced-price lunch paid by families. The funding increases each school year until the fee is completely covered in 2022.
- [New Mexico HB 10](#) (2020) prohibits districts and charters from charging a reduced-price-eligible student a copayment for school breakfast or school lunch meals. It also requires the state department of education to provide funding to those schools to offset the copayments and determines how funding will be allocated.
- [Washington HB 1342](#) (2021) eliminates copays for reduced-price lunches for students in Pre-K-12th grade starting in the 2021-22 school year. It also requires the superintendent of public instruction to allocate funding for this purpose.

[Additional Resources](#)

Food Research Action Center, [School Meals Legislation and Funding by State](#)

This report shows state mandates that require all or some schools to offer the School Breakfast Program and/or the National School Lunch Program. The report also examines additional funding in each state, where available. Several states use additional funding to eliminate reduced-price fees paid by families, to offset food and labor costs for schools, or to provide additional reimbursement to schools.

School Nutrition Association, [Legislation and Policy](#)

The School Nutrition Association maintains a variety of resources on legislation and policies impacting child nutrition programs, including both federal and state policy. SNA publishes [quarterly policy reports](#) on legislative trends around child nutrition. Additionally, SNA has published a guide on [state approaches to unpaid meal charges](#).