



SCHOOL MEAL ENROLLMENT

OCTOBER 2022

DECLINING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND CHILD HUNGER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Schools are not only centers of learning—they are also the central spoke in the nation’s effort to combat childhood hunger and ensure children have the nutrition they need to thrive. The National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program provide children with nutritious meals each school day. However, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, significant changes are happening within our nation’s schools that are disrupting children’s education and nutrition.

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, PUBLIC SCHOOLS HAVE LOST MORE THAN 1.2 MILLION STUDENTS SINCE 2020, MEANING THAT CHILDREN ARE FACING THE POTENTIAL LOSS OF BOTH LEARNING AND ACCESS TO NUTRITION.¹

In addition to reducing hunger, participation in a federally funded child nutrition program is associated with significantly lower obesity rates among low-income children and improved health and academic outcomes, meaning that decreased access to school meals can be expected to have detrimental impacts on childhood food security, public health, and academic outcomes.²

The pandemic has also created disruptions in how schools and school meal programs operate. Some of these changes have been challenges that make it difficult to source and prepare food, such as supply chain disruptions and high turnover among staff. Some of these changes have been opportunities to strengthen meal programs, such as greater flexibility in how meals are prepared and served and the provision of meals at no cost to families.

The impact on school meal participation in Illinois is mixed, with school lunch participation declining sharply (39 percent) relative to pre-pandemic participation but school breakfast participation increasing somewhat (about 9 percent).³ More research is needed to understand children and families’ changing relationship with schools and school meals and whether these changes are temporary or lasting, but there are actions that we can take now to make sure children are connected to the food they need.

Here in Illinois, policymakers can encourage schools to continue the unprecedented flexibility and innovation they demonstrated during the pandemic by helping them leverage existing federal policies that make school meals as accessible as possible to families, such as the Community Eligibility Provision and Breakfast After the Bell. At the federal level, Congress should expand federal policies, like CEP, that make it easier for families to enroll in school meal programs.



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WHY ARE CHILDREN LEAVING SCHOOL SYSTEMS?

Across the country, public schools have lost more than 1.2 million students since 2020.⁴ A recent report by Advance Illinois found that nearly every level of education in Illinois saw declines in enrollment that exceeded historical trends and cannot be explained by demographic shifts.⁵

Research has not demonstrated that one single cause is behind the nationwide decrease in public student enrollment, but several reoccurring themes have emerged.

Across the U.S., and particularly among low-income and older children, the disruptions of the pandemic have increased homelessness and increased the need for older children to obtain employment to help their families stay afloat financially.⁶ Even as unemployment rates return to pre-COVID levels, many adolescents who left school to seek employment early in the pandemic are not returning to school.⁷

Some families with young children chose to delay the start of school or homeschool children in early grades, reporting concerns about COVID exposure for kids too young for approved vaccines, the impacts of remote learning on early education, and the lack of requirements in many states for children to attend pre-k or kindergarten. In 18 states that shared data, the number of students being homeschooled increased by 63 percent in the 2020-2021 school year and then fell by just 17 percent in the 2021-2022 school year, meaning many children have not returned to public schools.⁸ These families may be more likely to reconnect with the public school system later in their child's education than families who leave for other reasons.⁹

For many areas that have seen the largest decreases in school enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic, declining enrollment was already an existing trend that was heightened in the past two years. For example, Chicago public schools have seen dropping enrollment for over 20 years, largely due to out migration among Black families to regional suburbs or other parts of the country and decreasing birth rates among families that remain in the city. Since 2000, Chicago Public Schools have seen a consistent decline of about 10,000 students per year.¹⁰ These trends accelerated during the pandemic, which saw about 25,000 students leave the public system in two school years. Because each year's school funding budget is based on attendance in the previous year, this ongoing trend has left Chicago schools with less funding each year.¹¹

School systems that returned to in-person instruction more quickly during the pandemic saw fewer lost students compared to districts that remained remote for longer.

Unfortunately, we have limited data to understand where children who leave the public school system are going. Private schools, many of which remained open during the crisis, have seen gains in enrollment.¹² Some families may have moved out of the school district or out of state. But there is a concern that some children may simply be lost from the public education system.

FEWER CHILDREN IN SCHOOL, FEWER PLATES IN THE CAFETERIA

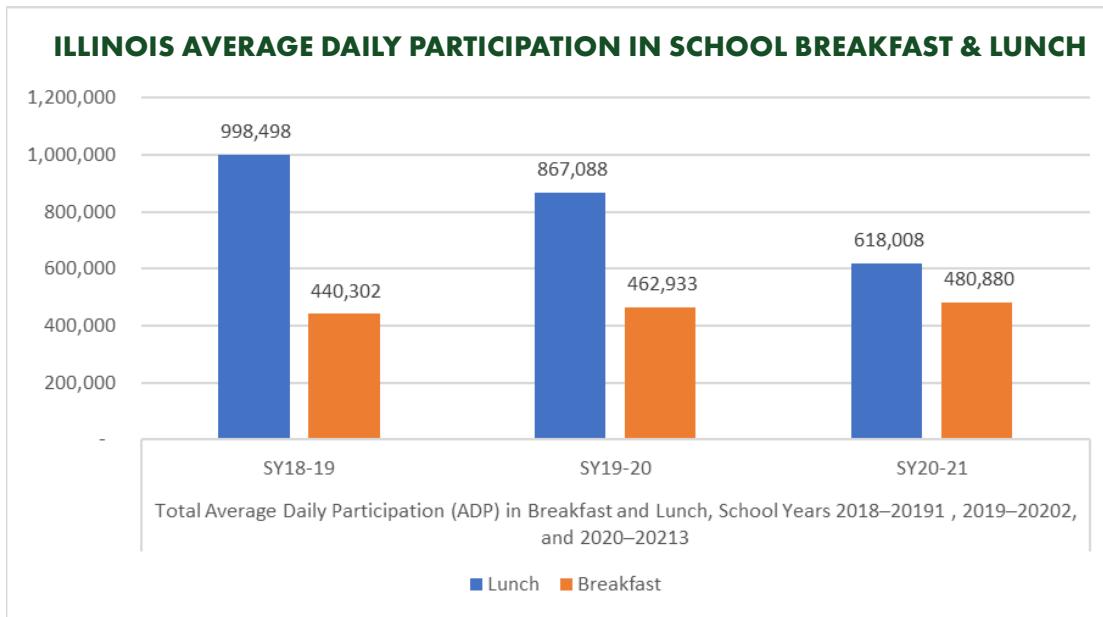
A paradox is playing out in lunchrooms across the U.S. The COVID policy response included significant waivers of child nutrition program rules resulting in easier administration of meal programs for schools and decreased meal costs for families. But despite an unprecedented increase in free meal availability, lunch participation rates are plummeting nationwide. Compared to the 2018-2019 school year, the 2020-2021 school year saw a 32.4 percent decrease in lunches served through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), Seamless Summer Option (SSO), and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) combined, a loss of 1.4 billion meals to children.¹³

In Illinois specifically, the impact over the last few years has been mixed. Lunch participation dropped over 39 percent from school years 2018-2019 to 2020-2021, a greater decline than the national average. This loss means 61 million fewer meals to Illinois children. By contrast, Illinois school breakfast participation increased 9.2 percent during the same period, or an additional 6.3 million breakfasts consumed.



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Average daily participation is the average number of meals served of that type per day during that school year. Breakfasts consumed overall increased, particularly as more free breakfasts were available through waivers. Lunch participation dropped across all price categories during the same time. Data: Food Research Action Center, 2022

While data exists on trends in school meal participation, more research is needed to understand precisely why participation patterns are changing. When overall school enrollment declines, it is a natural consequence that school meal participation would also decline. But those macro enrollment trends do not explain why Illinois saw a sharp decline in school lunch participation coupled with a modest increase in school breakfast participation. Data has not yet been released for SY21-22, but data from the most recent school year will provide an important benchmark to understand whether school meal participation trends of the last few years will continue or revert back to pre-pandemic patterns.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR CHILDREN TO BE OUT OF SCHOOL?

For low-income children, missing school means missing out on nutritious meals in addition to social and educational impacts.

Many low-income children participate in federally funded school meal programs. When those children are away from school, they lack access to breakfast and lunches provided by schools, and their families may have difficulty replacing school meals. Children from food-insecure households receive a larger proportion of their diet from schools than children from food secure households, so a loss in school meal access likely hits low-income children hardest.¹⁴ National School Lunch Program lunches provide at least one-third of the recommended key nutrients for children, and children that participate in school meals are more likely to consume fruits, vegetables, and milk. Research has found that receiving free or reduced-price school lunches cuts rates of poor health by 29 percent.¹⁵

Childhood food insecurity increased during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, even though food insecurity rates for the population overall did not increase.¹⁶ The closure of schools and resulting decrease in children's access to free and reduced-priced meals contributed to rising hunger rates among children.¹⁷ In the second year of the pandemic, when robust pandemic policies were in place to support families with children, childhood food insecurity actually fell slightly below pre-pandemic levels.¹⁸



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Unjust racial disparities in child hunger worsened during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, already more than twice as many Black households were food insecure compared to white households.¹⁹ Two years into the pandemic, white families with children (7.9 percent) are less likely to be food insecure than families with children overall (12.5 percent), while black (22.7 percent) and Hispanic (18 percent) families with children were more likely to be food insecure than families overall.²⁰

Missing school also has broader impacts on child well-being. In a summer 2022 report, Advance Illinois found that available information suggests that K-12 proficiency on standardized assessments and 9th grade On-Track rates declined substantially.²¹ Furthermore, the impact has not been experienced evenly, but has laid bare and exacerbated existing inequities across lines of race, income, and educational need.²² In K-12 Schools, the pandemic widened inequities in access to instructional opportunities for BIPOC students and children from low-income households. The report found that these students were significantly less likely to have the digital infrastructure they needed for remote learning, even after significant state and local investments and efforts to expand access.

Chronic absences are a strong predictor of a student not completing high school, which causes lifelong impacts on earning potential, health outcomes, and risk of incarceration. Similar to child nutrition outcomes, decreasing attendance compounds racial and ethnic inequalities in academic outcomes. According to a McKinsey report, by December 2021, students in majority-Black schools were overall 12 months behind peers in majority-white schools. The same report saw that while absenteeism rates for high-income students have returned to pre-pandemic rates, low-income students have experienced increasing chronic absenteeism rates even as schools reopen. If rates continue, this translates to as many as 3.3 million fewer high school graduates because of the pandemic.²³

WHAT CHANGES DID SCHOOL MEAL OPERATORS FACE DURING THE PANDEMIC?

To continue to feed children despite nationwide school closures, in March 2020 Congress authorized the USDA to issue nationwide child nutrition waivers through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. Schools across the country utilized the flexibility in funding, reporting, procurement, and delivery to innovate around how meals were distributed to children. If not for the action of innovative school nutrition directors who leveraged these new program flexibilities and feeding models, it is likely that child hunger rates would have increased even more during the first year of the pandemic.

While schools were closed in the first year of the pandemic, schools shifted away from traditional cafeteria style meals. Instead, schools used a pair of waivers giving flexibility around meal times and waiving the requirement that meals be consumed in a congregate setting to provide prepared meals that families could pick up and take home. Families were able to pick up both breakfast and lunch to consume at home, often picking up multiple days' worth of meals at a time.

As communities returned to in-person learning, schools leveraged policy waivers to support social distancing when children were back in the classroom. Many schools provided meals in the classroom, where students could safely sit six feet apart, rather than serving cafeteria style meals.

Recognizing that food sourcing was a challenge as supply chain disruptions impacted the type and quantity of food available for procurement, Congress authorized meal pattern waivers, giving schools more flexibility in what foods were served to children. Coupled with labor shortages – including among cafeteria staff – and food price inflation, school meal operations have faced unprecedented challenges during the pandemic.





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WHAT STATE POLICY ACTIONS ARE NEEDED TO CONTINUE TO FEED SCHOOLCHILDREN?

Schools have demonstrated unprecedented adaptability and creativity in feeding children during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example by providing take home meals or serving meals in the classroom. This same flexibility can help to maintain children's access to nutritious food even when the pandemic recedes.

Breakfast After the Bell is a flexible program model that many schools have adopted to offer breakfast to students at more accessible times, for example after the school day has begun, and in more accessible places, for example in the classroom or a grab-and-go kiosk rather than seated in the cafeteria. Traditional cafeteria style breakfasts can limit participation for several reasons. Particularly with current staffing shortages, it can be difficult to coordinate bus schedules with cafeteria breakfast schedules, leaving children without enough time to eat breakfast before class starts. Cafeteria breakfasts can also create stigma as low-income children head to the cafeteria and children who ate meals at home head to their lockers and classrooms.

By contrast, Breakfast After the Bell enables schools to serve children in more accessible and equitable ways. Grab and go breakfasts allow children to pick up a prepared meal on their way to class. Breakfast in the classroom serves children meals in the classroom after the school day has begun. Each model fits different school environments and student ages, giving schools the opportunity to choose the model that works best for them and their students. Overall, by delivering breakfast differently, Breakfast After the Bell can make school breakfast more accessible for students and increase participation.

With a modest investment, Illinois could better help schools draw down existing federal funds. Illinois schools already have the option to implement Breakfast After the Bell under current federal law. Illinois policymakers should support schools in taking this step by providing start up grants and other incentives.

Illinois can also invest school meal programs directly. For example, in SY2021-2022, Illinois provided a per meal reimbursement of \$0.04 above the federal reimbursement rate. Illinois funding has reduced in recent years, depriving all Illinois schools of important funding to bolster their meal programs. Illinois could also invest in school meals in a targeted way, for example supporting the adoption of CEP or eliminating the Reduced-Price meal category so that all children at or below 185 percent of poverty received meals for free.

WHAT FEDERAL POLICY ACTIONS ARE NEEDED TO CONTINUE TO FEED SCHOOLCHILDREN?

Whether responding to the current disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic or strengthening child nutrition programs for the long-term, school meal policy should focus on flexibility for schools, convenience for families, and reducing stigma for children.

Based on declining school enrollment, ongoing staff turnover, supply chain disruption, and historic food inflation, it is clear that schools are still facing significant challenges. Some of the COVID-era waivers should be made permanent to give meal providers increased flexibility in the long-term, for example the congregate waiver allowing meal programs to send meals home with families. Some schools utilized this during COVID to send the next day's breakfast home with children, and other communities utilized it when school was out for summer or long school breaks.

Congress should also take action to simplify the application process for families and reduce administrative burden for schools. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) allows eligible schools and school districts in high-poverty areas to offer free meals school-wide if at least 40 percent of students are identified as automatically eligible for a free meal from direct certification through other programs. Improving CEP by increasing the payment rate schools receive for providing free meals and lowering the community eligibility threshold from 40 percent to 25 percent, as proposed in the Build Back Better Act, would allow more districts to join CEP and bring free meals to all children in their schools. Expansion of CEP means more kids are connected to nutritious meals at school. Adoption of CEP is associated with both higher math test scores and attendance rates.²⁴ Schools that implement CEP are required to operate breakfast programs, increasing access for that most important meal of the day, further expanding access to nutrition.



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