



Equity

on the menu

THE CASE FOR UNIVERSAL FREE SCHOOL MEALS



JANUARY 2024



HAWAII APPLESEED
CENTER FOR LAW & ECONOMIC JUSTICE





HAWAI‘I APPLESEED
CENTER FOR LAW & ECONOMIC JUSTICE

www.hiappleseed.org

Author: Jordan Smith

Hawai‘i Appleseed is committed to a more socially and economically just Hawai‘i, where everyone has genuine opportunities to achieve economic security and fulfill their potential. We change systems to address inequity and foster greater opportunity by conducting data analysis and research to address income inequality, educating policymakers and the public, engaging in collaborative problem solving and coalition building, and advocating for policy and systems change.

The work of Hawai‘i Appleseed is about people. The issues we work on—housing, food, wages, the state budget and taxation, and racial and indigenous equity—are important because they ensure people have access to shelter, sustenance, and the means to survive and thrive individually and collectively. Addressing these issues requires the knowledge and expertise of the people that have first-hand experience and live with the adverse consequences of our flawed systems.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
School Meals: Barriers to Access in Hawai‘i	4
The Solution: School Meals For All	6
Universal Free School Meals in Hawai‘i	8
Appendix	12
Endnotes	13

Copyright © 2024 Hawai‘i Appleseed Center for Law & Economic Justice. All rights reserved.
733 Bishop Street, Suite 1180, Honolulu, HI 96813

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although it is rarely included on the standard school supply list—between the glue sticks, highlighters and scientific calculators—school meals are one of a child’s most important school supplies. The positive impacts access to a nutrient-dense school breakfast and lunch have on student attendance, academic performance, and well-being is well-researched and undisputed.¹

Participation in school meal programs decreases food insecurity, fills the nutrition gap between children from lower- and higher-income households, and provides the most nutritious meal or meals in some students’ entire day.² Yet, for Hawai‘i’s keiki, access to this essential school supply is inequitable, and revocable when parents are unable to pay—Hawai‘i is one of only a few states that legally allows this.³

The United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) School Breakfast Program (SBP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP) have played crucial roles in providing meals to children for decades, serving 2.5 billion breakfasts and 4.9 billion lunches in FY2019.^{4,5} However, in addition to their many benefits, these programs also have limitations that leave gaps in coverage and access to meals for some children, especially those from households struggling to make ends meet. It is imperative to recognize the current and historic role of community organizing and mutual aid in covering these gaps and feeding the most vulnerable in our communities.

The Black Panther Party’s Free Breakfast for Children Program in the late 1960s was one of the first community initiatives to provide free meals to children in need.⁶ The efforts of the Black Panthers were driven by a commitment to equity and economic justice, and highlight the long-standing need for and success of universal meal programs. In fact, the Panther’s program inspired the National School Breakfast program, rolled-out nationwide in 1975.⁷

During the COVID-19 public health emergency, the federal government authorized a two-and-a-half year long, nationwide universal free school meals pilot program which—among other benefits—significantly reduced child hunger in at-risk households by 7 percent,⁸ and eased the financial burden on families during an economic crisis.^{9,10} Unfortunately these federal flexibilities have ended, causing schools in Hawai‘i and around the nation to revert back to charging students for meals, and lunch-shaming—practices that stigmatize students whose meal accounts have a negative balance and are unable to pay.¹¹

In response to these challenges, eight states across the country have taken the initiative to fund and implement their own Universal Free School Meal (UFSM) programs. These states recognize the worthwhile investment in their keiki and the numerous benefits of UFSM, including eliminating lunch-shaming and meal debt, reducing stigma, and addressing inadequate income eligibility rates for working families struggling to make ends meet.

Universal Free School Meal programs are powerful tools to promote equity, support economic justice, and combat childhood food insecurity in Hawai‘i and across the United States. By drawing on the historical legacy of community-based initiatives, and by learning from the successful efforts of states implementing UFSM, Hawai‘i has the opportunity to take meaningful steps toward ensuring that no child goes hungry at school, and that our keiki have equal opportunities to succeed.



SCHOOL MEALS: BARRIERS TO ACCESS IN HAWAI‘I



“STUDENT MEAL DEBT FOR THE 2022-23 SCHOOL YEAR WAS \$100,000 BY MID-YEAR—MORE THAN 2.5 TIMES THE AMOUNT IN 2018-19 FOR THE ENTIRE YEAR.”

SCHOOL MEAL APPLICATION

Some students can forego the school meal application process and be directly certified for free and reduced-price school meals if their household participates in other means-tested federal programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, and—in 38 other states, but not Hawai‘i—Medicaid.¹² But for other households, families must submit an annual application to prove their eligibility. Families can face many barriers to completing the application, and few schools have staffing capacity to address individual parent needs or ensure that every student successfully applies for free or reduced-price meals.¹³

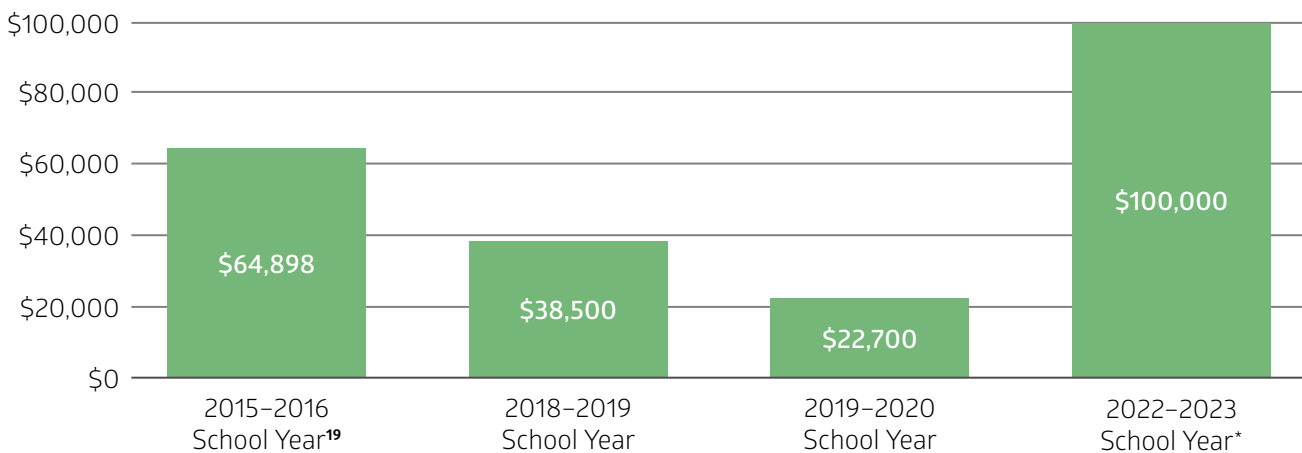
Language barriers, problems providing a record of income, and fear of disclosing information that may impact an undocumented or mixed-status family prevent families from completing or accurately completing the free and reduced-price school meal application.¹⁴ A USDA-commissioned analysis of the 2017–2018 school year found that an estimated 34 percent of students who were denied free or reduced-price meals were actually eligible to receive them.¹⁵

SCHOOL MEAL DEBT AND LUNCH SHAMING

Hawai‘i’s uncommon policy of allowing children to be denied a meal for even small amounts of meal debt is a stark example of how existing practices perpetuate inequities and stigmatize students in need.¹⁶ Such practices can not only shame children for circumstances beyond their control, but also exacerbate the problem by preventing them from receiving essential nutrition during the school day.

Meal debt and lunch shaming are significant issues in Hawai‘i. However, the lack of public transparency regarding school meal debt policies and practices is a barrier to understanding the full extent of the issue and advocating for meaningful change. According to the Hawai‘i State Department of Education (HIDOE), the state’s largest and only school district, student meal debt for the 2022–2023 school year was \$100,000 as of December 2022—more than 2.5 times the amount of meal debt reported in the 2018–2019 school year (the last full school year where students were charged for school meals), and at only halfway through that academic year.¹⁷

Figure 1. HIDOE School Meal Debt¹⁸



THE SOLUTION: SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL

Universal Free School Meals programs offer up to two free, nutritious meals (i.e. breakfast, lunch, or both) to all students in a qualifying school, regardless of their ability to pay. These programs are designed to improve access to and increase participation in school meal programs—especially for students from households with lower incomes. UFSM augments the traditional income-based eligibility system and removes known barriers to participation including economic, administrative, language and social challenges.²⁰

Across the country, UFSM has been implemented successfully through the intentional blending of policies and funding mechanisms at the federal, state and local levels. Funding mechanisms vary from state to state, with many states utilizing General Fund appropriations, while a handful of states have passed voter-approved tax measures on the wealthy specifically to fund their programs (see Appendix).

“Every day I am in contact with students who would benefit from universal free breakfasts and lunch... I cannot tell you how many students get sent to school with a bag of chips or bag of candy for the day. Whether that’s all that student’s parents could afford, whether that’s all they had time to provide, or whether those parents think that bag of chips/candy is sufficient nourishment for their child throughout the school day...

“[In addition,] every classroom in every school I have previously and currently worked in has a snack drawer or container, the contents of which are provided by the teacher of that room... The teachers see a need to provide food and nourishment for students, so they do. Please take this burden off teachers, off the parents, off the students themselves, and provide free school meals for every student.”

— Sarah Fukuzono, educational assistant at a Hawai‘i public school in testimony before the Hawai‘i State House Committee on Education, 2023, used with permission



FIVE BIG REASONS TO SUPPORT UNIVERSAL FREE SCHOOL MEALS

1. Promote Equity and Justice

Two out of three Hawai'i households that struggle to make ends meet are ineligible for free school meals.²¹ Universal free school meals (UFSM) promote equity and resilience by ensuring that every child has access to nutritious meals, regardless of their economic circumstances, and foster economic justice and equal opportunities.

2. Reduce Childhood Food Insecurity

A 2022 study of schools implementing UFSM found an almost 5% decline in households classified as food insecure.²² UFSM is a proven strategy to reduce childhood food insecurity and improve the overall well-being and academic performance of children.

3. Improve Academic Performance

After implementing UFSM in New York City, student test scores improved the equivalent of 6 weeks of additional schooling.²³ Students who eat do better than students who miss meals. Studies of UFSM in other states have shown large test score improvements and improved academic performance at participating schools.²⁴

4. Eliminate Stigma

By making meals universally free, UFSM eliminates the stigma associated with having school meal debt, or receiving free or reduced-price meals, creating a more inclusive and supportive school environment.

5. Leverage Shared Investment

While implementing UFSM requires a significant financial investment, there are a web of funding options and community partnerships available to ensure equitable implementation, including federal funding and state and local resources.



UNIVERSAL FREE SCHOOL MEALS IN HAWAI‘I



Hunger and inequality costs us all. Food security, as a social determinant of health, is one of many non-medical factors that influence children’s health outcomes and lifelong well-being.²⁵ Childhood food insecurity in Hawai‘i presents a complex and pressing problem, deeply rooted in economic disparities and socioeconomic challenges. Addressing childhood food insecurity in the state is not just a matter of providing nourishment; it is fundamentally an economic justice issue. School meals are the healthiest²⁶—and sometimes the only—meals of the day for some students. Hungry students cannot learn.²⁷ Funding and implementing a universal free school meal program is crucial to building a more equitable and resilient Hawai‘i.

“ADDRESSING CHILDHOOD FOOD INSECURITY IN THE STATE IS NOT JUST A MATTER OF PROVIDING NOURISHMENT; IT IS FUNDAMENTALLY AN ECONOMIC JUSTICE ISSUE.”

PROGRAM ESTIMATED STATE COSTS²⁸

	2022–23 Participation Rates ²⁹	Projected Participation Rates ³⁰
Breakfast Only	\$1,254,006.40	\$3,980,789.11
Lunch Only	\$14,122,603.25	\$21,900,033.35
Breakfast & Lunch	\$15,376,609.65	\$25,301,479.85

280 HAWAI‘I SCHOOLS PARTICIPATED IN NSLP AND SBP IN SY22–23

257 (92%)

Total HIDOE sites³¹

19 (7%)

Public charter school sites³²

4 (1%)

Mix of private nonprofit, Hawai‘i National Guard, and residential child care institutions³³

106 (38%)

Participating public and charter school sites offering universal free school meals through participation in CEP³⁴

46%

Percentage of the more than 165,000 enrolled public school students currently eligible for free school meals³⁵

The USDA implements Identified Student Percentage (ISP) eligibility rule change in October, 2023.

63% (or 162) of HIDOE schools, and 100% (or 23) of public charter schools, are now eligible to provide free school meals to all students under CEP in SY 2023–2024.

That’s up from 28% (or 72) of HIDOE Schools, and 70% (or 16) of public charter schools, respectively.³⁶

With an average daily participation rate of more than 100,000 students for lunch and 32,000 for breakfast, **a UFSM program in Hawai‘i would cost approximately \$25.5M**, accounting for an expected participation increase due to all meals being free.^{37,38} This estimate does not include the impact of more schools participating in federal provision programs which would likely decrease the cost of the program to the state.



PROMISING PROGRAM AND POLICY PRACTICES

Based on lessons learned from the national UFSM program piloted during the pandemic, and from state level implementation, UFSM programs and policies are being refined to promote farm-to-school, to empower school food staff, and to ensure implementation does not jeopardize a school's Title 1 funding—which is allocated to schools where a majority of students come from low-income households.³⁹ Several promising program and policy practices have emerged, aimed at ensuring the success and equitable implementation of UFSM initiatives:



Provision Programs for High-Poverty Schools

Require eligible UFSM schools to participate in a federal provision program like the [Community Eligibility Program](#) (CEP) and [Medicaid Direct Certification Demonstration Project](#). These approaches not only reduce the financial cost to the state, but also streamlines the process of providing free meals to eligible students, ensuring access to those who need them most. It is important to note that participation in programs like CEP may come at a financial disadvantage and insurmountable cost to the school, so an opt out clause for schools experiencing hardship should be available.



Alternate Data Collection Forms

Many schools rely on information collected from the standard school meal application form to guide their funding formulas and allocations—especially Title 1 funding. As utilized under CEP, schools should promote and use a standardized alternate income form, such as the [Family Household Survey](#), to collect needed information from families that does not impact their ability to receive free meals.⁴⁰



Funding for Frontline Staff

The state should include and allocate funding to increase wages or provide stipends and training to frontline kitchen staff. Adequate compensation not only offsets the impact from increased participation, but can also attract and retain skilled food service workers, enhancing the quality of meals and the overall success of the UFSM program. California provided \$150 million in one-time funding for staff training and kitchen infrastructure upgrades to support UFSM implementation.⁴¹



Incentives for Local Food Purchasing

The state should provide financial incentives for schools to purchase local food. This not only supports local agriculture and economies, but also improves the nutritional value, cultural relevance, and appeal of school meals. Local food incentives also promote community engagement, and help create a more sustainable food system and a more sustainable UFSM program. New Mexico's program provided an additional \$20 million to fund school kitchen infrastructure improvements that promote scratch and local cooking.⁴²

By incorporating these promising policies and practices, a UFSM program in Hawai'i can effectively promote equity, remain financially viable, and support economic justice while fostering a healthier and more inclusive school environment.



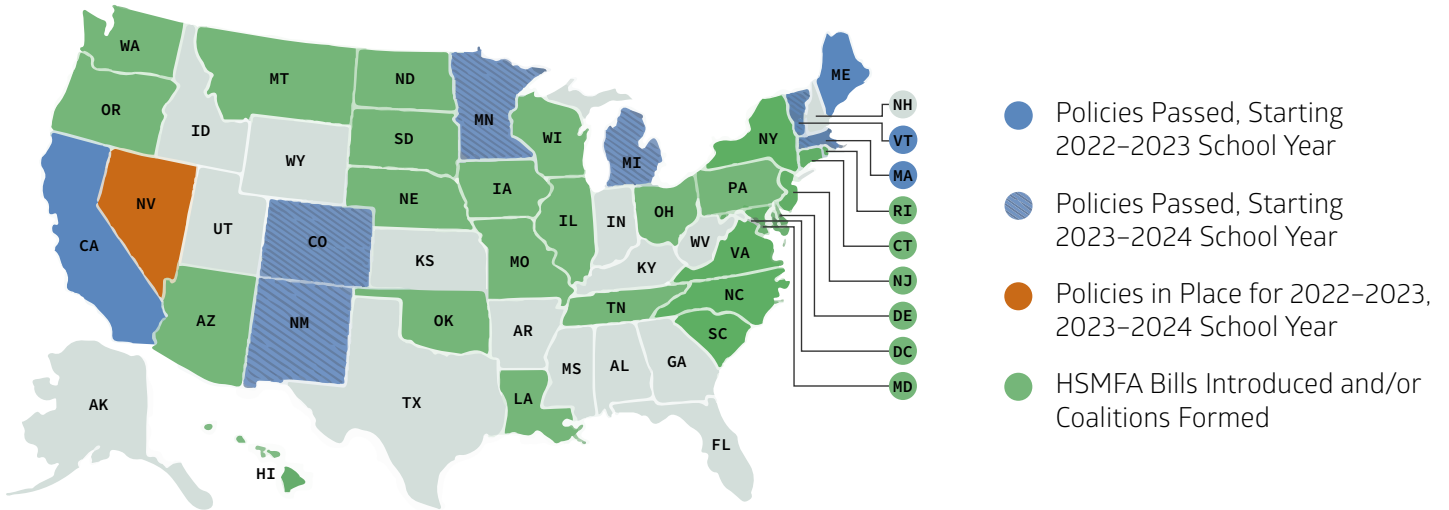
CONSIDERATIONS FOR PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

While the intention is to provide equity for all public school students, a notable challenge arises due to differences in the operational structure of public charter schools operating independently compared to those operating under the HIDOE.

Unlike the HIDOE, not all public charter schools participate in the NSLP and SBP because of operational and fiscal constraints and inequities.⁴³ In the 2022–2023 school year, only 20 out of the 37 public charter schools participated in the NSLP and SBP.⁴⁴ Moreover, the Hawai'i Public Charter School Commission—responsible for overseeing public charter schools—operates in a distinct capacity, more akin to a regulatory agency, and lacks the resources to manage a UFSM program similar to the HIDOE.

Without adequate federal reimbursement for meals and addressing the known resource inequities, some public charter schools would face an additional financial burden if required to participate in an UFSM program. Further conversation is needed with the HIDOE, Hawai'i Public Charter School Commission, and other charter and school food stakeholders to determine viable long-term solutions to overcoming these inequities. In the near-term, public charter schools should be allowed to opt out of a UFSM program if it is not financially feasible to participate.

APPENDIX



Eight states have already passed policies to offer free meals, and many others are prepared to follow suit. Image courtesy of the Food Research & Action Center.

States with UFSM	Starting School Year	Funding Mechanism ⁴⁵
California	2022–2023	General Funds/Education Fund Appropriation.
Colorado	2023–2024	Voter-passed tax measure that reduces income tax deductions available to households earning \$300,000 or more.
Maine	2022–2023	General Funds/Education Fund Appropriation.
Massachusetts	2023–2024	Voter-approved 4% tax on incomes over \$1 million.
Michigan	2023–2024	General Funds/Education Fund Appropriation.
Minnesota	2023–2024	General Funds/Education Fund Appropriation.
New Mexico	2023–2024	General Funds/Education Fund Appropriation.
Vermont	2023–2024	General Funds/Education Fund Appropriation via a \$.003 increase in the property tax rate.

ENDNOTES



1. CDC Healthy School, “School Meals,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, October 19, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/nutrition/schoolmeals.htm>
2. Community Preventive Services Task Force, “Social Determinants of Health: Healthy School Meals for All,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 2022, <https://www.thecommunityguide.org/pages/tffrs-social-determinants-health-healthy-school-meals-all.html>
3. Ordonio, Cassie, “Hawaii Legislature: Inside The Push To Make School Meals Free In Hawaii,” *Honolulu Civil Beat*, January 30, 2023, <https://www.civilbeat.org/2023/01/hawaii-legislature-inside-the-push-to-make-school-meals-free-in-hawaii>
4. Toossi, Saied, “School Breakfast Program,” United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, September 27, 2023, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/child-nutrition-programs/school-breakfast-program>
5. Toossi, Saied, “National School Lunch Program,” United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, September 27, 2023, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/child-nutrition-programs/national-school-lunch-program>
6. Gaskins, Elliott, “Black History Month: Celebrating the Origins of Free Breakfast and the Food Justice Movement,” No Kid Hungry, February 1, 2023, <https://www.nokidhungry.org/blog/black-history-month-celebrating-origins-free-breakfast-and-food-justice-movement>
7. Ibid
8. Dongo, Lestina and Lindsay Monte, “Less Hunger in At-Risk Households During Pandemic Expansion of School Meals Program,” United States Bureau of the Census, April 4, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/04/less-hunger-in-at-risk-households-during-pandemic-expansion-of-school-meals-program.html>
9. Bylander, Alexis, Crystal FitzSimons and Grace O’Connor, “Large School District Report: Operating School Nutrition Programs During the Pandemic,” Food Research & Action Center, May 2022, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/large-school-district-report-2022.pdf>
10. Toossi, Saied, “Cost of school meals and households’ difficulty paying for expenses: Evidence from the Household Pulse Survey,” Report No. EB-37, United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2023, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=106914>

11. School of Education Online Programs, “What Is Lunch Shaming? How Accessibility to Lunch Impacts Student Learning,” American University, June 30, 2020, <https://soeonline.american.edu/blog/what-is-lunch-shaming>
12. “National School Lunch and School Breakfast Program Demonstration Projects to Evaluate Direct Certification with Medicaid” United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, December 28, 2023, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/direct-certification-medicaid-demonstration-project>
13. School Nutrition Association, “2023 School Nutrition Trends Report,” 2023, <https://schoolnutrition.org/resource/2023-school-nutrition-trends-report>
14. Community Preventive Services Task Force, 2022
15. Milfort, Roline, Jeffrey Taylor, Laurie May and Megan Collins, “Third Access, Participation, Eligibility, and Certification Study (APEC-III) Final Report,” United States Department of Agriculture, September 2021, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/APECIII-Vol1.pdf>
16. Lee, Suevon, “Why Hawaii Kids Can Still Be Denied School Lunches,” *Honolulu Civil Beat*, October 9, 2019, <https://www.civilbeat.org/2019/10/why-hawaii-kids-can-still-be-denied-school-lunches>
17. Hayashi, Keith T., “Testimony before the Hawai‘i State Senate Committee on Education regarding House Bill 540 HD1 Relating to Education,” Hawai‘i State Department of Education, March 22, 2023, https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/sessions/session2023/Testimony/HB540_HD1_TESTIMONY_EDU_03-22-23_PDF
- 18.. Ordonio, 2023
19. Lee, 2019
20. Community Preventive Services Task Force, 2022
21. American Community Survey, “Table B17024: Age by Ratio of Income to Poverty Level in the Past 12 Months,” United States Bureau of the Census, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT1Y2022.B17024?q=ratio+age&t=Poverty&g=040XX00US15>
22. Marcus, Michelle and Katherine G. Yewell, “The Effect of Free School Meals on Household Food Purchases: Evidence from the Community Eligibility Provision,” *Journal of Health Economics*, 84, July 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhealeco.2022.102646>
23. Schwartz, Amy Ellen and Michah W. Rothbart, “Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance,” Center for Policy Research, Maxwell School, Syracuse University, 203, July 2019, https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/docs/default-source/research/cpr/working-papers/wp-203-let-them-eat-lunch.pdf?sfvrsn=efae783d_8
24. Amin, Reema, “Universal free lunch is linked to better test scores in New York City, new report finds,” *Chalkbeat*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2019/10/15/21121847/universal-free-lunch-is-linked-to-better-test-scores-in-new-york-city-new-report-finds>
25. National Alliance on Mental Illness, “Social Determinants Of Health: Food Security,” <https://www.nami.org/Advocacy/Policy-Priorities/Supporting-Community-Inclusion-and-Non-Discrimination/Social-Determinants-of-Health-Food-Security>
26. United States Department of Agriculture, “USDA Announces Steps To Improve Child Health through Nutritious School Meals,” February 3, 2023, <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2023/02/03/usda-announces-steps-improve-child-health-through-nutritious-school>
27. No Kid Hungry, “Teachers: Hungry Kids Can’t Learn,” https://www.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/hungry_kids_cant_learn_-_hunger_in_our_schools_micro_report.pdf
28. Lost revenue from co-pays only. Does not take into account any changes in administrative costs.

29. Assumes SY 2018–19 average daily participation rates and SY2020–21 eligibility data for reduced price and paid students for all public and charter schools.
30. Assumes a 6.8 percent increase for lunch and 12.1 percent increase for breakfast over SY18–19 average daily participation rates for reduced price, and paid students (USDA estimates).
31. Hawai‘i Child Nutrition Programs, “October Data 2023 (SY22–23) Report: All School Food Authorities,” Hawai‘i State Department of Education, 2023, <https://hcnp.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/All-SFAs-October-Data-Report.pdf>
32. Ibid
33. Ibid
34. Hawai‘i State Department of Education, “Community Eligibility Provision Program,” <https://www.hawaiipublicschools.org/TeachingAndLearning/HealthAndNutrition/StudentHealthResources/Pages/CEP.aspx>
35. Hawai‘i Child Nutrition Programs, 2023
36. Effective October 26, 2023, the USDA final rule change amends the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) regulations by lowering the minimum identified student percentage (ISP) from 40 percent to 25 percent. Lowering the minimum ISP will give states and schools greater flexibility to offer meals to all enrolled students at no cost when financially viable. As a result of this rule, more schools are eligible to participate in CEP and experience the associated benefits, such as increasing students’ access to healthy, no-cost school meals; eliminating unpaid meal charges; reducing stigma; and streamlining program administration and meal service operations.
37. Hawai‘i Appleseed analysis
38. Food and Nutrition Service, “USDA Community Eligibility Provision Characteristics Study, School Year 2016–2017 (Summary),” United States Department of Agriculture, March 2022, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/CEPSY2016-2017-Summary.pdf>
39. Hawai‘i State Department of Education, “Media Kit: Title 1,” <https://www.hawaiipublicschools.org/ConnectWithUs/MediaRoom/MediaKit/Pages/home.aspx#:~:text=Title%20I%20is%20the%20federal,meet%20challenging%20state%20academic%20standards>
40. Hawai‘i State Department of Education, “Community Eligibility Provision Frequently Asked Questions,” August 5, 2021, <https://www.hawaiipublicschools.org/TeachingAndLearning/HealthAndNutrition/StudentHealthResources/Pages/CEPFAQs.aspx>
41. Pearce, Allie, Akilah Alleyne and Anona Neal, “5 States Addressing Child Hunger and Food Insecurity With Free School Meals for All,” Center for American Progress, May 4, 2023, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/5-states-addressing-child-hunger-and-food-insecurity-with-free-school-meals-for-all>
42. Ibid
43. Lau, Yvonne, “Testimony before the Hawai‘i State Senate Committee on Education regarding House Bill 540 HD1 Relating to Education,” Hawai‘i State Public Charter School Commission, March 22, 2023, https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/sessions/session2023/Testimony/HB540_HD1_TESTIMONY_EDU_03-22-23_.PDF
44. Ibid
45. Katz, Emily and Hayleigh Rockenback, “New State and Federal Policies Expand Access to Free School Meals,” National Conference of State Legislatures, July 27, 2023, <https://www.ncsl.org/state-legislatures-news/details/new-state-and-federal-policies-expand-access-to-free-school-meals#:~:text=Six%20states%20pay%20for%20their,households%20earning%20%24300%2C000%20-or%20more>

