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Media Contact:

Will Caron

Communications Director

Hawai'i Appleseed Center for Law & Economic Justice

808-369-2515

will@hiappleseed.org

New report calls upon the state to join a growing national movement and provide free meals to all Hawai'i public school students

HONOLULU, Hawai'i — 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. However, a newly released report, "[Equity on the Menu: The Case for Universal Free School Meals](#)," warns that federal school meal programs are not reaching many students in Hawai'i households that are struggling to make ends meet. The report calls for the state to extend free meals to all students, regardless of their eligibility for the federal programs.

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, and [eased the financial burden on families during an economic crisis](#). The end of these flexibilities has caused schools in Hawai'i and around the nation to revert back to charging students for meals, running the risk of [stigmatizing students](#) whose meal accounts have a negative balance and parents are unable to pay. Hawai'i is [one of only a few states that legally allows this](#).

"Hungry keiki cannot learn," said Jordan Smith, Senior Policy Analyst for Anti-Hunger Initiatives at Hawai'i Appleseed. "This report underscores the stark reality that challenges the well-being of countless families in Hawai'i. The inability of current federal income eligibility guidelines to reflect the cost of living in Hawai'i leaves many households on the brink of hardship and denies some of our most vulnerable keiki equal opportunity to thrive."

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.

The report estimates that extending free meals to all public school students would come at a cost of approximately \$25 million per year—only about 1 percent of the Hawai'i State Department of Education's operating budget. The report provides evidence that this worthwhile investment increases test scores, decreases food insecurity, promotes resilience, and improves health outcomes, particularly for children from lower-income households.

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[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.