

Not Just Dollars and Cents; But Sensibilities

Gabrielle Davis

Abstract

Children in school should be given better lunches free of charge to further facilitate their academic efforts, their physical well-being, and their emotional/mental well-being. The idea is not novel, yet there has been only slow progress on this front. This article presents information about the Farm Bill as it applies to the quality of school lunches, the costs of the National School Lunch Program as it translates to a family of five, conclusions of a study that analyzed school lunch choices and consummation in regards to nutrition, and results from studies showing the benefits of free school lunch on student morale and academia.

Food Is a Basic Need

Food can be a need or a luxury. Milk for babies is a necessity. Sushi can be a delicacy. How are school students affected by not having enough of what they need? How can we ask students to pay attention when their stomach is growling and cramping in hunger? The National School Lunch Program (NSLP est.1946) provides free lunch already, right?

They do, but only when the proper paperwork is filled out. The current level of participation of eligible students for the NSLP is at 75% (Ogundari, 2025). Within the NSLP is the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). CEP provides free meals to all students in a school no matter their family income. Schools with 40% of students directly certified or identified as homeless, migrant, or foster children are eligible. Malnutrition and hunger can lead to

externalizing behaviors. Students in CEP schools have fewer suspensions and disciplinary events by over 2% (Domina et al., 2024).

You Reap What You Sow

Our government created legislation to help farmers during the Great Depression, and it has since evolved to be multi-faceted (Hayes & Kerska, 2021). In its current manifestation, *The American Relief Act of 2025* has three basic components: It provides subsidies for farmers, supports food security, and affords protections for the environment. Going back to its roots, this bill helps keep crop prices level for farmers and adds stability to the market. Over the past ten years, 16 billion dollars were spent on subsidies, most of them for the 'Big Five' crops of corn, soybeans, wheat, cotton, and rice. 'Specialty Crops' include fruit, vegetables, and tree nuts and have earned far

fewer subsidies and are produced less. (Hayes & Kerska, 2021). Nutrition standards are set by the NSLP for meals that schools serve to meet reimbursement requirements. Schools also receive surplus agriculture stock from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2017).

Tray 1 or Tray 2

Intuitive Eating (IE) is eating with an approach to building a healthy relationship with food. IE “has been associated with higher fruit and vegetable intake and biomarkers linked to reduced cardiovascular disease risk . . . and decreased BMI. Additionally, IE has been positively associated with indicators of psychological well-being, such as higher satisfaction with life, positive affect, positive body image, higher self-esteem, and optimism and inversely associated with maladaptive eating behaviors such as binge eating and disordered eating symptoms” (Ge et al., 2024, p. 128). Providing healthy, delicious meals for free could be the catalyst that breaks the obesity and unhealthy lifestyles of Americans. Without nutritious food, students may struggle to concentrate and struggle with cognitive development. This can manifest in behavioral problems and poor academic outcomes (Oudghiri, 2024).

The USDA compiles nutrition for students based on an 85% consumption of lunch to meet health standards within 600-700 calories. A study from a large city middle school of 722 students analyzed what the students chose and what was consumed for lunch. In total, only 7% of lunches were fully consumed. The study found that students had eaten a mere 443 calories on

average during lunch. School lunches are still leaving students without the nutrients that they need, and worse, 94% of lunch choices consumed lead to sugar above recommended levels for students (Kaiser & Hamlin, 2024). This shows that we need to provide lunch choices that are fresher, healthier, and more nutritious.

Give Children Security, Give Them Lunch

According to Chrismon et al. (2022), “Adolescents experiencing food insecurity have been found to be two times more likely to think about dying and five times more likely to have attempted suicide ” (p. 71). A study of 11,836 Vermont middle school students from 2015 provided the stark truth. Of the students who had faced food insecurity, 36% said they did not feel connected to their community. More upsetting is that 41.5% of students who faced food insecurity reported having suicidal ideation (Chrismon et al., 2022). They are telling us they feel alone and hopeless.

Conclusion

Students need support to become healthy adults. Food is a resource that should be given to them for free and of a higher quality than what was overgrown and heavily flavored with salt and sugar. This nourishment will improve their mental health by demonstrating their importance to our society. When students are healthier and happier, they can perform better academically and have fewer externalizing outbursts. In summary, it is a basic concept: feed the students.

References

- Chrismon, M., Franco, J. C., Craig, C., & Caillouet, K. A. (2022). Mitigating factors between food insecurity and mental health among middle schoolers. *JOPERD: The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 93(6), 71–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2022.2086430>
- Domina, T., Clark, L., Radsy, V., & Bhaskar, R. (2024). There is such a thing as a free lunch: School meals, stigma, and student discipline. *American Educational Research Journal*, 61(2), 287–327. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312231222266>
- Ge, L., Byrd, K., & Giang, M. T. (2024). Positive feeding practices during childhood are associated with higher intuitive eating in adulthood. *American Journal of Health Education*, 55(2), 127–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19325037.2023.2297282>
- Hayes, T. & Kerska K. (2021, November 3). Primer: Agriculture subsidies and their influence on the composition of U.S. food supply and consumption. Retrieved February 26, 2025. From <https://www.americanactionforum.org/research/primer-agriculture-subsidies-and-their-influence-on-the-composition-of-u-s-food-supply-and-consumption/>
- Kaiser, R., & Hamlin, D. (2024). The national school lunch program and healthy eating: An analysis of food selection and consumption in an urban title I middle school. *Education & Urban Society*, 56(2), 143–163. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00131245221110552>
- Ogundari, K. (2025). The effects of school food assistance on children’s food sufficiency during the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. *Journal of Poverty*, 29(1), 47-66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10875549.2023.2259897>
- Oudghiri, S. (2024). Addressing food insecurity: Why a comprehensive farm bill is essential for rural communities. *Rural Educator*, 45(3), 74–76. <https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1522>
- United States Department of Agriculture. (2017, November). The national school lunch program. Retrieved February 26, 2025. From <https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp>.

Recommended Citation

Davis, G. (2025). Not just dollars and cents; but sensibilities. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2025. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com>

Appendix

Lunch Ticket Cost for a Family of 5 Based on Federal Poverty Level (2024-2025 Prices)

Income	FPL %	Lunch Ticket			Elementary	Middle	High
\$48,000/yr	127%	Free		Breakfast	\$1.80	\$1.90	\$2.00
\$50,000/yr	132%	Reduced		Lunch	\$2.95	\$3.10	\$3.20
\$68,000/yr	180%	Full Price		Total/yr	\$855.00	\$900.00	\$936.00