

# ELIMINATING THE BURDEN OF SCHOOL MEAL DEBT

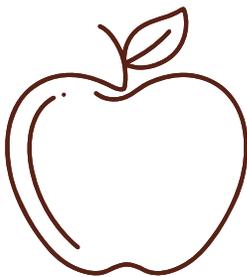


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*Justice for all.*

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## THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

School meals are a critical part of Kansas kids' educational experience and wellbeing. Across the state, school nutrition programs provided over 330,000 school lunches per day in 2021-2022.<sup>1</sup> In addition to ensuring students are healthy and full, school meals also boost a child's capacity for learning, engaging in extracurricular activities, and connecting with behavioral and emotional support.



**"Because of universal free meals, most Kansas students did not accrue meal debt."**

## UNIVERSAL FREE MEALS

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the USDA made all school meals across the nation completely free to students during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years.<sup>2</sup> No matter a household's income or background, students had access to free breakfast and lunch at school. Because of universal free meals, most Kansas students did not accrue meal debt. Children were guaranteed nutritious meals at school, and nutrition staff had increased capacity, strengthening the trust between them and caregivers.

Federal policymakers did not extend universal free school meals for the 2022-23 school year. Because of this, school meal debt has the potential to be a burden to families and schools again in the 2022-2023 school year. This is especially true for new school caregivers who may not be familiar with paying for school meals or applying for free and reduced-priced meals for their children. Luckily, districts still have the power and capability to make changes at the local level and ease the foreseen burden of school meal debt.

## SCHOOL MEAL DEBT

The National School Lunch and/or School Breakfast Program is implemented throughout public schools and many private schools in Kansas, helping qualifying households to afford school meals based on their income. In Kansas, over 212,000 students receive free or reduced-price meals.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, many children fall into “school lunch debt” and students as young as kindergarten can accrue thousands of dollars in debt due to unpaid school meal fees. At the end of 2019, school meal debt in Kansas totaled \$4.45 million.<sup>4</sup>

Poverty persists even outside of the federal guidelines. According to Education Data Initiative, 26,042 Kansas children in 2021 were food insecure but still ineligible for any federal assistance.<sup>5</sup> A Kansas family of four must make less than \$34,075 per year in order to qualify for free meals, and less than \$51,338 to qualify for reduced-price meals. Many families making slightly more than that do not qualify, yet still experience the same disparities and barriers as the families who do qualify.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, many families still experience poverty and hardship as they work to pay for rent, mortgages, gas, groceries, and utilities and often cannot afford to pay the reduced price for school meals.

This is how school lunch debt starts to accrue for many Kansas kids.

When school faculty and food nutrition staff spend time following up with families and caregivers to collect school meal debt or set up payment plans, it takes valuable time and resources away from their ability to do what they do best—serve students. In some cases, local businesses and organizations step up to donate and hold fundraisers to wipe out school meal debt, but long-term, sustainable solutions are possible to ensure more Kansas kids can thrive.

At the end of 2019, school meal debt in Kansas totaled \$4.45 million.



USDA Photo by Bob Nichols

## WHAT IS "SCHOOL LUNCH SHAMING?"

School lunch shaming is the phrase commonly used to describe when students receive different treatment than their peers based on a negative balance in their school meal account.<sup>7</sup> Whether intentional or not, when kids receive different meals or—in the worst scenarios—are not able to eat lunch at school due to meal debt, they report feelings of shame, stigmatization, and isolation.

No child deserves to feel stigma or shame, especially when school meal debt is not within their control. To ensure all kids can succeed in the classroom, equitable access to school meals is paramount.

## IDEAS AND BEST PRACTICES FOR HANDLING UNPAID SCHOOL MEAL FEES

Kansas schools can flip the script! Through collaboration among community members, local school districts, the Kansas State Department of Education, and beyond, Kansans can identify long-term solutions that work for them and relieve the burden of school meal debt. Below are ideas for addressing school meal debt policies:

- Ensure every student eligible for free or reduced-price school meals is certified and that school meal charges are not being applied to children who are eligible.
- Serve the same meals to all students, no matter their ability to pay.
- Work directly with students' custodial guardians on all financial matters. Children should not feel like they are being punished for something that is not within their control.
  - Direct all communications to the parents or caregivers, instead of communicating with them through the child.
  - Districts should not throw away food that has been served to a child with school meal debt.
- Schools with a high percentage of students from lower-income households should look into available options to offer free meals to all children with the Community Eligibility Provision or Provision 2. Both of which are federal programs individual schools and districts can qualify for in order to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students.
- If a school's only option is to provide students with an alternate meal, ensure this is done in a private, sensitive and/or confidential manner that doesn't isolate or publicly shame the students.

Ideas and best practices were developed in partnership with the Food Research and Action Center <sup>7</sup>



# OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE AND KANSAS KIDS

At a statewide level, anti-hunger champions, school board members, nutrition staff, and parents can come together in community to fight for Kansas to enact Universal Free Meals, much like the states of California, Maine, and Vermont have done.<sup>8</sup> In our local school districts, parents, board members, and school staff have the power to review their district's current school meal debt policies and recommend updates to their districts and school boards.

As Kansans, our power and passion for collaborating to improve our communities can move mountains. Let's harness that strength to problem solve, relieve the school meal debt burden, and work with our schools to develop smart and applicable policies.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## FOR MORE INFO:

### Martha Terhaar

Thriving Campaign Advocate  
Kansas Appleseed  
mterhaar@kansasappleseed.org

### Paige Olson

Thriving Campaign Advocate  
Kansas Appleseed  
polson@kansasappleseed.org

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