

Childhood hunger will last beyond next year; Biden administration, Congress must extend free meals program | COMMENTARY

<https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/op-ed/bs-ed-op-0817-healthy-school-meals-20210816-7qpliz2nzjdqxdyxhs3ysq342e-story.html>

By MICHAEL J. WILSON and LORETTA I. HOEPFNER
FOR THE BALTIMORE SUN | AUG 16, 2021 AT 6:18 AM

Children can't learn and grow on an empty stomach.

We see how hunger impacts our communities, especially families with children. Prior to COVID-19, hundreds of thousands of children in Maryland lived in homes that struggled to put food on the table. Since the onset of the pandemic, an alarming spike in food insecurity among children has been reported.

Children who experience food insecurity face dire consequences in their overall health, well-being and development. Hunger has no place in Maryland. Now more than ever, children in Maryland need free Healthy School Meals for All.

Since March 2020, USDA waivers have allowed all children across the state and the country to access school meals at no charge to mitigate the harmful impacts of this unprecedented time. As of May 30, 2021, a combined total of over 68 million of these free meals have been served across the state since the beginning of school closures in March 2020, according to the Maryland State Department of Education.

Congress and the Biden administration must act now to make sure this effective approach to addressing childhood hunger continues beyond the 2021-2022 school year, when the waivers are set to end. Our children's health, learning and development depend on it.

Studies show that children participating in school meals are less likely to have nutrient inadequacies and more likely to consume fruit, vegetables and milk during breakfast and lunch. As a result, children are less likely to experience obesity. On the other hand, very few packed lunches brought from home meet National School Lunch Program standards. For example, packed lunches brought from home by pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students have more calories, fat, saturated fat and sugar than school lunches, and less protein, fiber, vitamin A and calcium, according to a study conducted after implementation of the school meal nutrition standards. Indeed, since the nutrition standards of the Healthy and Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, school meals have become the [healthiest overall source of food](#) that children in America eat.

As vital as the School Nutrition Programs are to ensuring children's access to healthy, nutritious meals, the Food Research & Action Center [notes](#) that too many children in need are left out due to the current program structure. Children are certified to receive free school meals if their household income is less than \$35,000, which means many households that are struggling above this threshold aren't eligible. We also know that the national threshold of \$35,000 is insufficient in Maryland. In addition, many of these families end up with school meal debt.

Eliminating the cost barriers of school meals would help eradicate tremendous school meal debt for Maryland school districts. Before the pandemic, meal debts ranged from a couple thousand dollars to over \$200,000 in school districts across our state. Free school meals for all students will help school districts focus on feeding and educating students, not chasing dollars and stigmatizing low-income families.

Healthy school meals for all would also help alleviate the stigma associated with free school meals, removing the shame many children feel. There are many families in Maryland who do not qualify for free and reduced-priced meals yet still struggle to put food on the table. Implementing free Healthy School

Meals for All will provide healthy and nutritious school meals to these families who are just above the poverty line.

California and Maine recently became the first states in the country to pass legislation for free healthy meals for all public-school students, no matter their household incomes, beginning with the 2022-2023 school year. While these are important steps in addressing childhood hunger, we need a national policy instead of incremental state-by-state initiatives.

We have an opportunity to make historic and substantial advancements in addressing childhood hunger that will significantly benefit not only children in Maryland but across the nation. Now is the time to keep moving forward in the fight against childhood hunger.

Michael J. Wilson (mjwilson@mdhungersolutions.org) is director of Maryland Hunger Solutions. Loretta I. Hoepfner (loretta@mdaap.org) is executive director of the Maryland Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics.