

# We should serve kids food in school, not shame

August 24 2017, by Sarah Riggs Stapleton

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For the past several years, reports have surfaced about [the "shaming" of](#)

[students](#) for outstanding school meal debts. These students, often from low-income families, are being publicly humiliated because they have unpaid debt in their school meal accounts. Policies that shame students can include [stamping](#) on children's hands or arms, taking their food away and [dumping it](#) in the trash or giving them stigmatized [cold, partial meals](#) in lieu of the regular hot lunch.

As an [education researcher](#) who studies food in schools, I believe it's our duty in schools to treat students with dignity and compassion. Moreover, access to food is a basic human need and should be considered a right – regardless of income. The best way to combat meal debt shame in U.S. [public schools](#) is to provide every student with free meals.

## Addressing the problem

Public outcry about school meal shaming has sparked the creation of at least [30 GoFundMe campaigns](#) organized by [parents](#) and [teachers](#) to pay remaining balances on student accounts. One school volunteer has even created a [nonprofit](#) to help pay for kids' meals.

[New Mexico](#), [California](#) and [Texas](#) have begun crafting legislation to prohibit withholding food from students or to ban meal debt shaming altogether.

All of this has led to the USDA issuing a [memorandum](#) for school districts to clearly communicate their policies for meal fees to parents and guardians. However, the policy only suggests guidelines and provides no solid prohibitions against the shaming of students.

In a more extensive attempt to address the issue, the [Anti-Lunch Shaming Act of 2017](#) has been introduced in the House and Senate by a bipartisan group of lawmakers. This bill would ban the shaming of students, prohibit the throwing away of food after it's been served, and

require districts to communicate directly with parents and guardians about school food debts.

## **Schools' ethical responsibility**

While these measures are steps in the right direction, addressing lunch shaming is treating a symptom rather than the underlying disease. All students need to eat every day, regardless of the funds available to them.

Given that we provide free schooling for all students in the country – regardless of family income – perhaps we should reexamine our societal norms around feeding them as well. Sociologist [Janet Poppendieck](#) suggests in her 2010 book "[Free for All](#)" that we can and should provide free food to all students in our schools.

This move is not unprecedented: [Sweden](#), [Finland](#) and Estonia provide [free food to all students](#) in public schools, regardless of income. ([Finland's education system](#) is considered by many to be the best in the world, and [Estonia](#) has been rated in the top 10.)

Why are we so reluctant to feed all students in the U.S.?

Prior to the 20th century, schools did not provide any kind of food for students: Students typically went home for lunch or brought their own food. This separation between eating and learning may have been a relic of the [mind-body duality from Descartes](#), which assumes that schools are for disembodied minds. In fact, school meals did not [begin](#) until the early 20th century Progressive Era, when charities, women's groups and PTAs provided supplemental lunches to children in need. American schools began [offering meals](#) to students on a wide-scale basis as part of the New Deal program, partly (or perhaps mostly) to help [provide markets for agricultural surpluses](#).

## The need

Today there's unprecedented need for students in the U.S. to be fed. For the first time in our history, the [majority of students](#) in U.S. schools are living in poverty. Many of these students are food-insecure and dependent on the food provided in schools, sometimes as the [only meals](#) they eat daily.

Over [31 million](#) students in the U.S. rely on free or reduced-price meals through the National School Lunch Program. Through the program, free meals are available to families who make [under US\\$31,500](#) for a household of four, while reduced-price lunches are available to families who make just below \$45,000 for a family of four.

However, the income cutoffs for these programs don't take into account the wide variation in cost of living across the country. Moreover, [Poppendieck](#) has reflected that a family making just enough to be ineligible for free lunches may struggle as much as a family who qualifies.

The application for free/reduced lunches itself can be a barrier for students who might otherwise be eligible. Families may be worried about bringing attention to undocumented status through filling out an application, or they may simply be unclear about the process.

Families may also be ashamed to ask for help. For example, a teacher with whom I partnered in my [research](#) shared that though she experienced hunger as a child, her mother forbade her from accepting free meals at school. As a child, she didn't understand why, but was nonetheless subject to her mother's decisions.

In short, there are complicated nuances and challenges in understanding individual students' food security. Shame is already a part of this picture.

We shouldn't be compounding it.

## Addressing the need

The [Summer Food Service Program](#), a partnership between the USDA, nonprofits and government agencies (including [libraries](#)), provides free meals for kids ages 2-18 during the summer months when public schools are not in session. In this program, all a child needs to do to be eligible for the food is to show up at the designated place and time. I believe that this model of providing free food to children and teens with no need for proof of eligibility should be used in our schools, too.

There have been some strides toward making free food for all students a reality. Thanks to the [Community Eligibility Provision](#) of the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010, districts where at least 40 percent of students are served by benefit programs can choose to provide free food for all students. The federal government reimburses participating schools based on the percentages of students qualifying for benefit programs.

But this promising policy can lead to problems. For example, in the Portland, Oregon public schools, 12 schools [lost their community eligibility status](#) over the summer of 2017 because their qualifying student percentages declined.

What's more, while the Community Eligibility Provision serves broadly low-income areas, it doesn't address the increasing and perplexing nature of [suburban poverty](#), where children from low-income backgrounds may be overlooked because of the affluence around them.

It's simply not enough to provide free meals to some students, or to all students in some schools. While providing free meals to all public [school](#) students would be costly, given that we provide textbooks, facilities, teachers, special education services and other essentials required for

schooling, how can we continue to omit food as an educational essential?

Meal debt shaming is a serious problem, but [student](#) hunger is even more so. It's time to move aggressively to make free [food](#) available to all students, in all U.S. public schools. It's the least we can do.

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