

Changes are coming to school meals nationwide—an expert in food policy explains

June 7 2022, by Marlene B. Schwartz

For the two years during the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. public schools have been able to provide free meals for all students, including to-go meals in the summer. But on June 30, 2022, the federal waivers that expanded the school lunch program will expire.

In May 2022, SciLine interviewed [Marlene Schwartz](#), a professor of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Connecticut and the director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health, about how these changes will affect [children](#) and families and how [food](#) pantries can help.

The Conversation has collaborated with SciLine to bring you highlights from the discussion, which have been edited for brevity and clarity.

What is the role of school food in children's overall diet and health?

Marlene Schwartz: School food plays an important role, particularly since [the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which was passed in 2010](#), improved the National School Lunch Program. About [30 million children a day](#) participate in the [National School Lunch Program](#).

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act required the USDA to update not just the rules about what was served for the reimbursable lunch, but also

the rules for things like snacks and beverages that are sold in vending machines or other places in the [school](#).

Research has shown that [the meals served now are better](#), that [the meals children are eating are better](#), and, in fact, [some data suggests](#) that the trajectory of childhood obesity that has been such a concern has been attenuated because of the success of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act.

During the pandemic, the federal government provided waivers to school food programs so they can change their services. What changes have the waivers permitted?

Marlene Schwartz: The largest change was allowing for all of the children to receive meals at no cost. That dramatically increased the number of children who had access to school meals.

Another large change that came from the waivers was for the summer meal program. Typically, that program is much smaller, and meals are served at particular sites in a community and children need to be brought there by a parent, and they need to eat the meal on-site.

During COVID-19, the USDA allowed that program to provide meals to-go. Breakfasts, lunches were packaged up and were distributed to the parents of the children, and this increased participation because it allowed parents to access these foods in a way that worked with their own schedules, particularly if they are working parents.

Assuming the waivers will expire as scheduled on June 30, how are schools going to cope?

Marlene Schwartz: It's hard to know how schools are going to cope, but dropping the waivers will make their jobs much harder.

We are adding the administrative burden of having to go back to collecting information from families to see who qualifies for the meals, and then, in the actual serving of the meals, having to know who's eligible for reduced or free meals and collecting money from those who pay. Those are things that, over the last couple of years, food service directors have not had to manage, giving them more time to really focus instead on the meals.

It's also important to recognize that we are still facing [supply chain issues](#). Food service directors often order the food months in advance. When that food doesn't show up, they really need to scramble to find substitutes. Those problems have increased the burden on them to run the program.

What are the effects of making school meals free for all students?

Marlene Schwartz: The findings are pretty clear that when students have universal free meals, [participation in school meals programs goes up](#), so more children eat them. And research shows that the meals that are provided through the school meal program are of higher nutritional quality than the [meals that children bring from home or get from other places](#).

Some studies have found that when you provide universal free meals, you have [improvements in academic performance](#), particularly for students who are at higher risk.

There is also evidence in [some studies](#) that universal free [school meals](#)

help improve family food insecurity rates. When a family knows that their child can get breakfast and lunch every day at school, it really allows them to save their food budget to purchase other foods for the house. And that helps them be more food-secure.

What is the role of food banks and pantries in shaping the diet and health of vulnerable children and families?

Marlene Schwartz: Within the charitable food system, there's been a real shift in thinking that has been a change from giving away as many pounds of food as possible to really looking at the nutritional quality of those pounds. That's thanks in part to [Feeding America](#), which is a national network of food banks, and [Partnership for a Healthier America](#), which is part of Michelle Obama's Let's Move initiative. Both of them are working with [food banks](#) around the country to really help them track the nutritional quality of their food and set goals for themselves in terms of maximizing the most nutritious foods they are able to distribute.

What do you wish people knew about the current state of school foods?

Marlene Schwartz: One thing that I would really like people to acknowledge is the improvements that have occurred in the school meal program after the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. One of the challenges that I've noticed in my research is that sometimes the menu that you get from your school says things like chicken nuggets, pizza, tacos, hamburger, and a parent might think that doesn't sound healthy.

What they don't know is that those chicken nuggets are baked, not fried, and probably are whole grain breadcrumbs. The pizza probably has a whole grain crust, lower-fat cheese and vegetables on it. There's this

tension between wanting to create school menus that will be appealing to children and also communicate the nutrition information to parents. And that's not the easiest thing to do.

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