

Free meals at school may boost attendance, lower obesity rates

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A review of U.S. data from 2012 through 2024 finds that when kids get free school meals, there's a potential for a slight increase in attendance and a lowering of child obesity rates.

Even kids from higher-income households benefited, as many took advantage of wholesome lunches provided by schools, the researchers said.

That means they could eat healthier fare "instead of bringing food from home or purchasing competitive foods at school from the à la carte line or vending machines, foods known to be less healthy," said a team led by Amanda MacFarlane. She directs the Texas A&M Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Evidence Center in Fort Worth.

The findings were [published](#) in the journal *JAMA Network Open*.

As MacFarlane's group noted, in 2022, the Biden administration introduced a national strategy to end hunger in America and boost [healthy eating](#). That program included "advancing a pathway to free school meals for all."

School meals tend to be healthier.

"The consumption of school meals leads to increased fruits, vegetables, fish, whole grains, lean protein and low-fat dairy intake, and decreased sugar, sodium and fat intake, including saturated fat," MacFarlane and colleagues said.

So, just how effective are free school meals at boosting kids' well-being?

To find out, the Texas team gathered up six of the best studies on the subject published between 2012 and 2024 (excluding the two pandemic years). These studies involved school meal programs at more than 11,000 schools nationwide.

Three of the studies looked at how many students took advantage of free school meals, and all found "increased meal participation" by kids, the

researchers said.

In [one study](#) conducted in Maryland and Pennsylvania, more than just kids from [low-income families](#) ended up eating the healthy fare schools provided.

"This study found a 69% higher rate of meals served among students who would not have qualified for reduced-price meals," MacFarlane's group noted.

Participation in free school meal programs was typically higher in [elementary schools](#) compared to [middle schools](#), the study found.

There was some evidence that school attendance rose for kids who received free school meals, as well. For example, in [one Wisconsin study](#), there was a 7.8% rise in days of school attended after the implementation of a free universal school meals program, although the authors stressed that figure failed to reach statistical significance.

One [California study](#) looked at obesity rates before and after school meals became free. It found a "0.60 percentage point reduction in obesity prevalence ... and a 0.58 percentage point increase in prevalence of normal weight," compared to kids in schools without such a [program](#).

Overall, the data suggests universal free school meal programs "are associated with increased meal participation and possibly improved attendance rates [and] reduced obesity prevalence," said the Texas team.

They note that more research needs to be done to see if no-cost [school meals](#) help boost the nutrition of the nation's children, and whether students' grades also benefit.

More information: Spill MK, Trivedi R, Thoenig RC, et al. Universal

Free School Meals and School and Student Outcomes: A Systematic Review. *JAMA Network Open*. 2024;7(8):e2424082. DOI: [10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.24082](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.24082)

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