

Universal Free Meals in NYC Schools

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The Effect of Universal Free Meals on Student Perceptions of School Climate: Evidence from New York City (2021), a recent study by Emily Gutierrez, finds that several important benefits to students result from the Universal Free Meals (UFM) program in NYC schools.

Some background. UFM provides free school lunches to all the city's students, regardless of family income, unlike previous federal meal provisions in which student eligibility was based on family poverty levels. The National School Lunch Program, established by Congress in 1946, offers free and subsidized school lunches to more than 30 million students in public and private schools and childcare centers. These federally funded lunches were means-tested, and in many states, eligibility was determined by family submission of annual income reports, traditionally labeled student lunch forms. Students reporting family incomes up to 130 percent of the federal poverty level were eligible to receive school lunches cost-free, students with family incomes up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level could receive reduced price lunches, and full cost lunches were available to all other students.

Early in the current century, the federal government and many states developed alternatives to school lunch forms as measures of school-level student poverty. States experimented with Census data, particularly annual updates of the American Community Survey, or used variations of the community eligibility provision (CEP) of the National School Lunch Program, particularly direct certification, to replace the collection of student lunch forms. Direct certification allows schools or districts to match students to state databases of federal assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, and Medicaid to determine student and school eligibility for subsidized school meals. From 2010 on, schools and districts across the country, including NYC, began to apply for UFM using direct certification. By 2017, for example, more than 500 NYC schools had adopted UFM. In the 2017-18 school year, the NYC school system made UFM system-wide, and federally subsidized school lunches became free for all NYC students.

Gutierrez's study assessed whether UFM increased student participation in the NYC school lunch program and changed student perceptions of school climate, particularly in relation to bullying, fighting, respect, and safety. Gutierrez used student demographic and school meals data from the New York City Department of Education and student perceptions of school climate data from the school system's annual School Environment Survey. She found that UFM increased school lunch participation among students who were previously eligible for free meals but rarely participated. Moreover, Gutierrez found that all students in UFM schools in NYC, regardless of socioeconomic status, reported reductions in perceptions of bullying and fighting within their schools. Students who were past recipients of free and reduced-price lunch also reported feeling safer in school areas such as the cafeteria where bullying often occurs.

Experts estimate that in the past, more than a third of NYC students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch did not participate in the program, to avoid the stigma and the bullying that often accompanies being identified as poor when they access subsidized school lunches. Gutierrez's study suggests that UFM can significantly reduce that stigma and bullying while increasing students' school lunch participation, particularly by those students who need subsidized meals the most. These important findings identify key positive effects of UFM, not only for low-income students who are traditionally stigmatized, but for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status. Moreover, previous research by Amy Schwartz and her colleagues at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs found that both poor and non-poor NYC students participating in UFM achieved higher Language Arts and Math test scores. Both Schwartz and Gutierrez's findings amplify how significantly UFM benefits both students and schools.



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But UFM also affects another critical issue – the determination of school-level eligibility for Title I status. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, authorized by Congress in 1965, provides significant supplemental funding to help school districts with high percentages of low-income students improve their academic achievement. More than half of all U.S. public schools receive Title I funds. The federal government appropriates those funds to state education agencies for distribution to local school districts, which in turn allocate funding to individual schools based on their poverty levels. For many years, districts determined their schools' eligibility for Title I status and funding by using self-reported poverty levels aggregated from school lunch forms, submitted by parents to qualify their children for federally subsidized school lunches.

Yet these self-reported annual income statements were vulnerable to varieties of patterned inaccuracy. For example, many eligible families refused to submit lunch forms because they were unwilling to report their annual income to government authorities. Other families underreported their annual income to help their children receive free or reduced-price lunches. In addition, because achieving school-level Title I status provided critical supplemental funding, some schools organized to ensure the submission of the lunch forms necessary to establish Title I eligibility. When one of us (Norm) served on a local school board in NYC, a PTA in his district regularly achieved Title I status by organizing parent volunteers to canvass every classroom to ensure rates of lunch form submissions that guaranteed Title I eligibility.

UFM and direct certification eliminate these distortions of the core purposes of Title I and simultaneously confer significant benefits to students and their schools. Once school meals become universal, students are less likely to be identified as poor and thereby stigmatized or bullied simply for accessing UFM. Schoolwide issues and tensions that result from such identification are significantly reduced. Families are no longer required to submit annual proof of income. Schools are relieved of the administrative burdens of collecting and aggregating school lunch forms. Most importantly, all students who need school lunches receive them cost-free. Finally, school-level equity is significantly increased by eliminating the daily identification of poverty status in the cafeteria. Given that UFM is a school meals program designed to improve students' daily health and nutrition, rather than an instructional, structural, or socio-emotional intervention, it has surprisingly deep and broad benefits.

Endnotes

¹ Gutierrez's study was published by Brown University's Annenberg Institute.