



Minnesota School Nutrition Association Lauds Passage of Healthy School Meals for All

St. Paul, MN (March 17, 2023) - The Minnesota School Nutrition Association (MSNA) commends Governor Tim Walz and the Minnesota Legislature for moving to permanently offer all students breakfast and lunch at no charge. The Association's [2023 Position Paper](#), released in January, underscored the need for all students to have equal access to school meals and for necessary reimbursements and funding to be directed to school nutrition programs to ensure long-term sustainability.

"We are grateful that Governor Walz and our legislators recognize the incredible benefits of providing all Minnesota students with access to healthy school meals to nourish their minds and support their school day," said Cheryl Pick, MSNA President and Director of Child Nutrition Services for I.S.D #51, Foley Public Schools.

MSNA supported [HF 5](#), introduced in the 93rd Legislature in January, as a path to free meals for all students enrolled in Minnesota schools. The legislation passed on [March 16](#) directs state funding to cover the difference between the federal reimbursement for each meal and the average cost of that meal, as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Under the proposal, schools that qualify must participate in the federal Community Eligibility Provision to receive free meal reimbursement rates.

A revision to the bill this week moved to provide a short-term action to address concerns about compensatory revenue - money that the state directs to school districts based on the number of students who qualify for free and reduced price meal benefits. The allocation of those funds is determined through data submitted through Applications for Educational Benefits, which include meal benefits. The Senate included language to ensure school districts would receive as least as much compensatory revenue for SY 2023-2024 as they have in SY 2022-2023 while a long-term solution is determined to address benefits applications and allocation of funds.

"Providing free, healthy school meals equitably to all students is an incredible win for our communities, and it will also help school nutrition programs avoid amassing school meal debt, which can cut into district education budgets," said MSNA Public Policy & Legislative Chair Darcy Stueber, Director Nutrition Services in Mankato Area Public Schools. "We look forward to implementing free meals for all in our cafeterias and working closely with school districts and state partners to support proper allocation of compensatory revenue."

As Public Policy & Legislative Chair, Stueber testified on MSNA's behalf multiple times to provide insights from the frontlines of school cafeterias on the benefits of universal meals.

[Research](#) shows school meals support student health and academic achievement by improving children's diets and combatting hunger. Federal pandemic waivers allowed schools to offer free meals to all students until their expiration at the end of the last school year. Currently, school meal programs in Minnesota that do not qualify to enroll in the [Community Eligibility Provision](#) must require families to complete free and reduced-price meal applications, and [non-eligible](#) students must pay for meals.

A wide range of negative impacts from the loss of free school meals was reported in a [recent survey](#) released by the national School Nutrition Association:

- 90.6% of programs that must collect meal applications reported a challenge getting families to submit the forms
- 96.3% reported unpaid meal charges/debt is a challenge
- 66.8% reported an increase in stigma for low-income students, who often depend on school meals as a key source of nutrition.

The Minnesota School Nutrition Association, which represents school nutrition professionals across the state, has been steadfast in support of offering free meals to ensure no child goes hungry during the school day or experiences any stigma or barriers to accessing the nutrition they need. In addition, providing healthy meals for all prevents unpaid meal debt, a burden on families that also threatens school district budgets.

For more information on how MSNA support students and school nutrition programs across the state, visit mnsna.org.

About the Minnesota School Nutrition Association

The Minnesota School Nutrition Association (MSNA), founded in 1956 as a state-wide association with local chapters, is a non-profit association of over 3,000 members who work to ensure that all children have access to healthy meals and nutrition education in Minnesota. For more information about MSNA and upcoming events, please visit www.mnsna.org.