

School Breakfast for All in NJ



The Issue: Childhood Hunger and Food Insecurity on the Rise in New Jersey

Despite being one of the wealthiest states in the nation, New Jersey has more than 270,000 Food-Insecure children. Between 2020 and 2023, childhood food insecurity rose from about 9% to 13.5%, and the latest ALICE report finds 36% of NJ households don't earn enough to support their basic needs. As housing, utilities, and food costs continue to rise, many families who are income ineligible for free school meals still can't afford to purchase breakfast at school or provide one at home. As a result, many children start their days with an empty stomach and are at a disadvantage in the classroom. Without a nutritious breakfast, students struggle to concentrate, retain information, and regulate their emotions, leading to lower test scores, increased absences, and behavioral challenges.

The Solution: Free School Breakfast for All Students

Providing free breakfast to all students is the most effective, efficient, and equitable way to ensure that all NJ students can start their day with a nutritious meal. Research shows that students who participate in school breakfast exhibit improved behavior, attendance, and academic performance, along with decreased tardiness and disciplinary actions. Children who eat breakfast also demonstrate stronger memory, better problem-solving skills, and higher standardized test scores.

School Breakfast for All Benefits

- **Simplified access for families:** A statewide program removes the burden of navigating complex eligibility rules. When breakfast is free for everyone, no family falls through the cracks due to confusion, paperwork, or stigma.
- **Better learning outcomes:** Students who eat breakfast exhibit improved behavior, attendance, and academic performance, as well as stronger memory, better problem-solving skills, and fewer disciplinary actions.
- **Healthier, happier students:** School breakfasts meet strict national nutrition standards, and participation is linked to reduced hyperactivity, anxiety, and depression.
- **Reduced hunger and increased equity:** Free school breakfast provides a dependable daily meal for food-insecure children, removing income-based barriers.

New Jersey must establish and fund a permanent, statewide School Breakfast for All program to ensure all students have access to a healthy meal to start their day so they can focus, learn, and thrive. Our neighbors in Pennsylvania and Delaware have already implemented free school breakfast policies, and New Jersey should do the same. Providing free breakfast to all students is a smart investment in NJ's children and the state's future.