

Participation in School Meals is Returning to Pre-Pandemic Levels

School breakfast and school lunch participation increased by over 1 million kids last year.

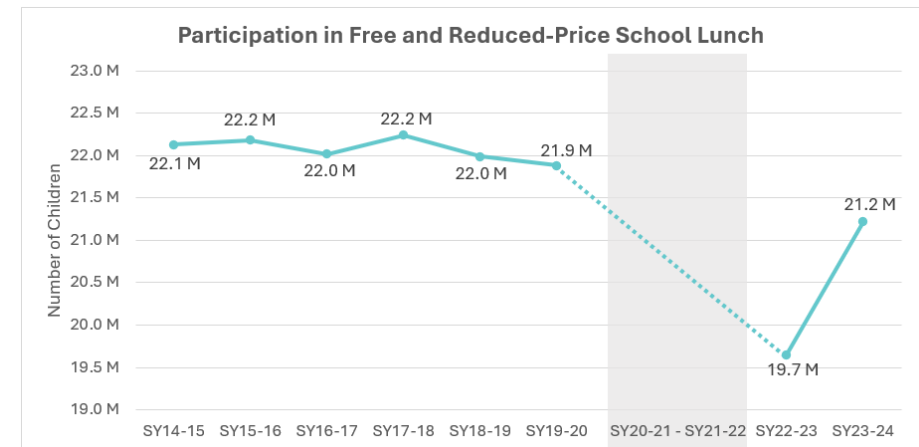
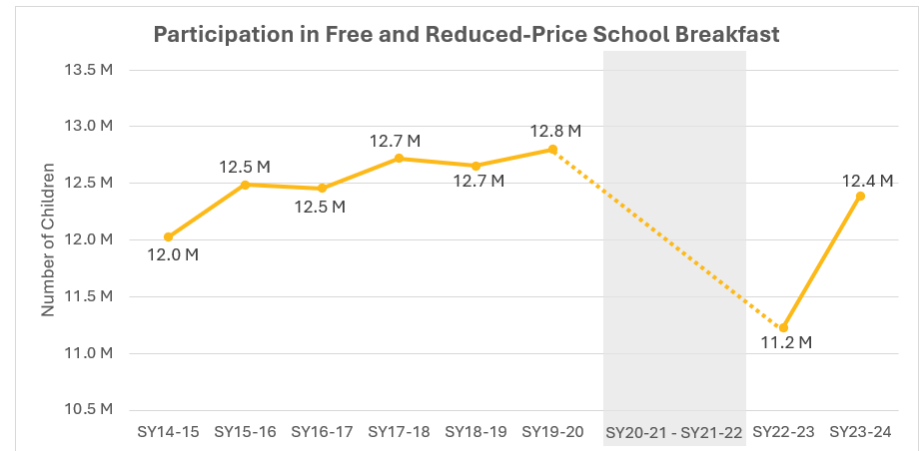
Eating school meals has a real, powerful impact on kids. For the millions of children who receive a free or reduced-price school breakfast or lunch, these nutritious, convenient and affordable meals fill in the gaps that many kids are missing at home by increasing their health and overall well-being.

Participation in School Breakfast and Lunch is Increasing

The number of kids eating school breakfast and school lunch declined significantly in school year 2022-23 after federal waivers that allowed school meal program flexibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic expired. Data from school year 2023-24 shows free and reduced-price meal participation is recovering at the national level, with **21.2 million children eating school lunch and 12.4 million children eating school breakfast** – nearly reaching pre-pandemic levels. But this trend is not consistent at the state level.

Only some states have experienced school meal participation recovery or growth since the pandemic. Among these, **participation grew the most** in states that [passed legislation](#) to expand access to free school meals, in states that directly certified qualified students for free or reduced-price school meals via [Medicaid Direct Certification Demonstration Project](#), and in states that expanded the use of the [Community Eligibility Provision](#).

But many states continue to experience historic lows, even those with legislation, indicating participation does not increase just because meals are available. No Kid Hungry partners report that food quality, short/rushed eating periods, and stigma are some of the issues influencing student participation. Meanwhile, schools and districts continue to grapple with staffing shortages, rising costs, and lingering supply chain issues.



School Meals Participation Data Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture National Data Bank v8.2., for the months of September through December. SY20-21 and 21-22 excluded from the chart due to national school meal waivers that allowed multiple program flexibilities, artificially inflating what we would consider “normal” meal service.



2023-24 Free and Reduced-Price (F/R) School Meal Participation by State

State	Number of F/R Students Eating Lunch (thousands)	Lunch Change from Pre-Pandemic (thousands)	Number of F/R Students Eating Breakfast (thousands)	Breakfast Change from Pre-Pandemic (thousands)
Alabama	441	37	264	29
Alaska	31	-11	17	-5
Arizona	419	-58	216	-50
Arkansas ¹	225	-25	262	99
California ¹	2,248	-348	1,299	-219
Colorado ¹	206	-24	109	-24
Connecticut ¹	198	2	111	9
Delaware	56	-19	35	-6
Dist. of Columbia ¹	42	-8	33	1
Florida	1,518	27	737	-24
Georgia ¹	861	-68	537	-14
Hawaii	60	-3	24	-3
Idaho	71	-28	34	-17
Illinois	745	-66	397	-24
Indiana	485	29	267	27
Iowa	194	-1	93	7
Kansas	188	5	100	-1
Kentucky	434	-35	291	-9
Louisiana ¹	443	-31	265	-17
Maine ¹	44	-22	30	-7
Maryland ¹	318	-26	191	2
Massachusetts ¹	368	17	210	20
Michigan ¹	631	16	388	34
Minnesota ¹	299	-14	165	7
Mississippi	262	-38	167	-20
Missouri	305	-83	200	-30

State	Number of F/R Students Eating Lunch (thousands)	Lunch Change from Pre-Pandemic (thousands)	Number of F/R Students Eating Breakfast (thousands)	Breakfast Change from Pre-Pandemic (thousands)
Montana	47	-7	28	-2
Nebraska	138	6	65	6
Nevada ¹	173	-15	97	-17
New Hampshire ¹	26	-11	12	-3
New Jersey ¹	419	-29	278	31
New Mexico ¹	152	-39	111	-12
New York ¹	1,401	-50	754	9
North Carolina	676	-30	416	23
North Dakota ¹	32	-7	18	0
Ohio ¹	601	-76	360	-16
Oklahoma	295	9	167	-24
Oregon ¹	169	-47	89	-23
Pennsylvania ¹	708	-12	422	50
Rhode Island	42	-11	24	-3
South Carolina	425	40	255	28
South Dakota	42	-6	21	-2
Tennessee	446	-81	286	-36
Texas ¹	2,752	-61	1,666	-91
Utah	137	-13	50	-14
Vermont ¹	27	-2	18	1
Virginia ¹	512	29	335	51
Washington ¹	310	-27	160	-8
West Virginia	142	-26	118	-2
Wisconsin	277	-32	155	-2
Wyoming	22	-1	10	-2

School Meals Participation Data Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture National Data Bank v8.2 for the months of September through December 2023.

1 – States with legislation and funding for expanded free school meals access in 2023-2024 school year ([source](#))