

# More Kids than Ever Before Qualify for Free School Meals

63% of children attending U.S. K-12 public schools are enrolled to receive free or reduced-price school meals – that’s over 31 million kids.

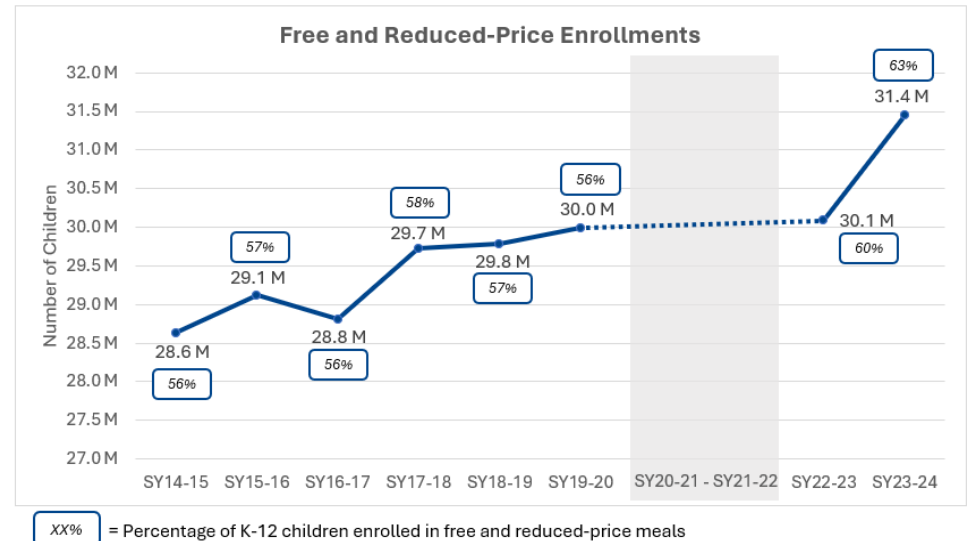
Research shows that free school meals can reduce food insecurity and improve student health and academic performance. Children from low-income households and those enrolled in federal assistance programs including SNAP and TANF qualify for free school meals, but many schools now offer free meals to all students, reducing stigma and improving student equity.

## Free and Reduced-Price Meal Enrollment is at an All-Time High

U.S. public schools reported **31.4 million children** were enrolled for free or reduced-price meals during the 2023-24 school year. This is **an increase of 4.5% from the previous school year**, with an additional 1.3 million kids now enrolled for free or reduced-price school meals.

This level of growth is unprecedented. Free and reduced-price meal **enrollment grew 0.9% on average before the COVID-19 pandemic**, an average increase of 300 thousand kids per year.

Increased utilization of national programs that expand access to free and reduced-price meals may explain the significant increase in free and reduced-price enrollments in school year 2023-24.



- The [Medicaid Direct Certification Demonstration Project](#) allows states to directly certify students for free and reduced-price meals based on Medicaid data, reducing the burden on families to complete meal applications. 21 states joined the project or expanded scope in school year 2022-23 and 2023-24, and many of these participating states correspond with those that had significant increases in the free and reduced-price enrolled children.
- [Community Eligibility Provision](#) (CEP) allows schools and districts to serve no-cost meals to all kids regardless of household income. Anecdotally, national participation in CEP has grown significantly. Looking at preliminary data from 11 states as a sample of the country, CEP participation increased from only 32% of schools pre-pandemic to 55% of schools this year.

Free and Reduced-Price Enrollment Data Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture National Data Bank v8.2. for the month of October.

SY20-21 and 21-22 are excluded from the chart due to national school meal waivers that did not require schools to collect F/R applications during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Uptake in Community Eligibility Participation analyzed in 11 states: CA, FL, GA, HI, IN, MD, MI, OH, TX, VA, WA.



## 2023-24 Free and Reduced-Price (F/R) Meal Enrollment by State

State	Number of Students Enrolled in F/R Meals (thousands)	Change from Previous Year (thousands)	Percent of Students Enrolled in F/R Meals	Change from Previous Year
Alabama <sup>1</sup>	585	76	80%	11%
Alaska	53	1	54%	3%
Arizona <sup>1</sup>	604	36	59%	5%
Arkansas	278	2	59%	0%
California	3,835	-17	65%	0%
Colorado <sup>1</sup>	365	34	43%	2%
Connecticut	281	8	58%	1%
Delaware <sup>1</sup>	81	1	55%	0%
Dist. of Columbia	96	16	86%	3%
Florida	2,245	74	77%	1%
Georgia <sup>1</sup>	1,191	115	74%	13%
Hawaii	89	0	54%	1%
Idaho	112	2	37%	2%
Illinois <sup>1</sup>	1,195	103	72%	4%
Indiana	646	-15	62%	1%
Iowa	261	6	49%	2%
Kansas <sup>1</sup>	262	-6	53%	4%
Kentucky	582	3	87%	2%
Louisiana <sup>1</sup>	611	18	91%	2%
Maine	62	-15	37%	-8%
Maryland <sup>1</sup>	543	46	59%	5%
Massachusetts	522	26	56%	2%
Michigan	887	51	63%	3%
Minnesota <sup>1</sup>	433	21	51%	2%
Mississippi	347	15	69%	-3%
Missouri	425	-10	48%	0%

State	Number of Students Enrolled in F/R Meals (thousands)	Change from Previous Year (thousands)	Percent of Students Enrolled in F/R Meals	Change from Previous Year
Montana <sup>1</sup>	75	7	50%	9%
Nebraska	178	3	55%	2%
Nevada	243	9	59%	3%
New Hampshire	39	1	25%	1%
New Jersey	597	22	48%	2%
New Mexico <sup>1</sup>	202	6	69%	5%
New York	2,096	68	82%	3%
North Carolina <sup>1</sup>	1,083	112	71%	7%
North Dakota	33	0	24%	-1%
Ohio <sup>1</sup>	890	74	53%	4%
Oklahoma <sup>1</sup>	427	149	64%	23%
Oregon <sup>1</sup>	297	-17	55%	0%
Pennsylvania <sup>1</sup>	1,047	41	65%	3%
Rhode Island	62	-4	46%	-2%
South Carolina <sup>1</sup>	633	128	80%	16%
South Dakota	55	0	39%	0%
Tennessee <sup>1</sup>	605	47	59%	4%
Texas	3,763	33	70%	0%
Utah	214	12	32%	1%
Vermont <sup>1</sup>	39	5	49%	12%
Virginia	733	38	58%	3%
Washington	562	8	53%	1%
West Virginia	204	2	82%	3%
Wisconsin	428	13	55%	2%
Wyoming <sup>1</sup>	36	5	41%	6%

F/R Enrollment Data Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture National Data Bank v8.2 for the month of October 2023.

1 – States that implemented or expanded Medicaid Direct Certification in school years 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 ([source](#))