

Participation in School Meals is Returning to Pre-Pandemic Levels

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

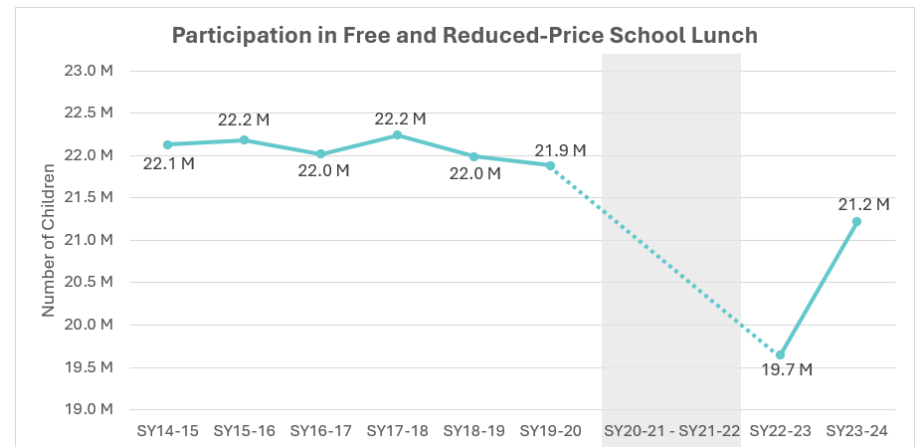
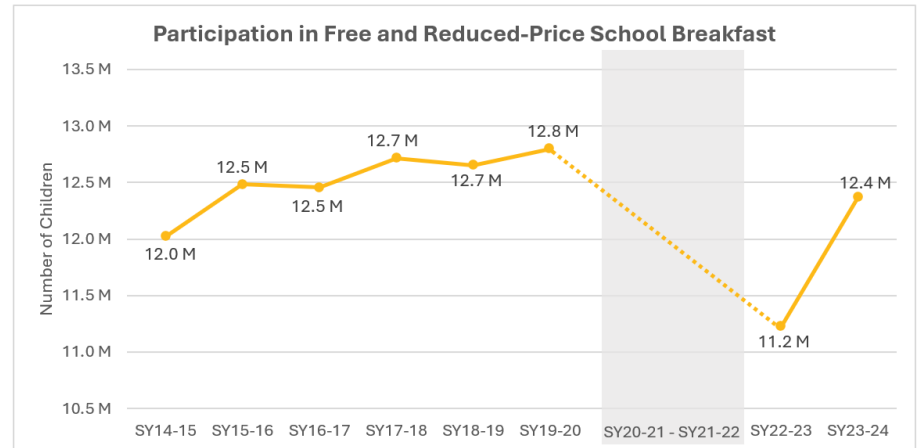
Eating school meals has a real, powerful impact on kids. For the millions of children who receive a free or reduced-price school breakfast or lunch, these nutritious, convenient and affordable meals fill in the gaps that many kids are missing at home by increasing their health and overall well-being.

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 2023 through May 2024.

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	433	29	256	21
Alaska	30	-11	16	-6
Arizona	431	-46	225	-41
Arkansas ¹	223	-28	256	94
California ¹	2,262	-335	1,319	-199
Colorado ¹	217	-14	113	-20
Connecticut ¹	199	3	112	9
Delaware	56	-20	35	-6
Dist. of Columbia ¹	39	-11	33	1
Florida	1,523	33	738	-23
Georgia ¹	858	-71	532	-20
Hawaii	58	-5	23	-4
Idaho	71	-28	34	-17
Illinois	743	-69	394	-26
Indiana	481	25	261	21
Iowa	192	-3	92	6
Kansas	186	3	98	-3
Kentucky	429	-40	286	-15
Louisiana ¹	436	-39	255	-26
Maine ¹	44	-22	30	-7
Maryland ¹	321	-22	191	2
Massachusetts ¹	372	21	215	25
Michigan ¹	610	-6	387	32
Minnesota ¹	296	-17	166	8
Mississippi	256	-44	160	-27

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	46	-7	28	-2
Nebraska	136	3	64	4
Nevada ¹	171	-17	97	-17
New Hampshire ¹	26	-10	12	-3
New Jersey ¹	436	-12	285	38
New Mexico ¹	150	-41	109	-14
New York ¹	1,395	-55	765	20
North Carolina	675	-31	411	18
North Dakota ¹	32	-8	18	0
Ohio ¹	607	-71	359	-17
Oklahoma	292	6	163	-28
Oregon ¹	180	-37	95	-17
Pennsylvania ¹	707	-13	421	49
Rhode Island	42	-11	24	-3
South Carolina	424	38	253	25
South Dakota	42	-6	21	-2
Tennessee	453	-74	287	-35
Texas ¹	2,729	-84	1,634	-124
Utah	138	-13	49	-15
Vermont ¹	29	0	19	2
Virginia ¹	511	28	333	49
Washington ¹	333	-3	175	7
West Virginia	140	-27	125	4
Wisconsin	279	-31	150	-7
Wyoming	23	-1	10	-1

School Meals Participation Data Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture National Data Bank v8.2 for the months of September 2023 through May 2024.

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