



COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
THE JOHN A. WILSON BUILDING
1350 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE, NW
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20004

CHRISTINA HENDERSON
Councilmember, At-Large
Chairperson, Committee on Health

Committee Member
Facilities
Human Services
Transportation and the Environment

Statement of Introduction
Universal Free School Meals Amendment Act of 2025
February 3, 2025

Today, I am proud to introduce the Universal Free School Meals Amendment Act of 2025, along with Councilmembers Zachary Parker, Charles Allen, Robert C. White, Jr., Janeese Lewis George, Matthew Frumin, Brooke Pinto, Brienne K. Nadeau, Kenyan R. McDuffie, and Anita Bonds. This legislation would provide free universal school breakfast, lunch, and after-school snacks to students in public, charter, and participating private schools in the District of Columbia. This measure was first introduced in Council Period 25 and received a hearing in November 2023.

For many children in the District, schools serve as more than a place of learning; schools provide essential resources to students and families to support their overall wellbeing. Through the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program, District schools provide nutritious meals to thousands of children each day. All students in the District receive free school breakfast. Students are eligible for free meals if their family's income is no more than 130% of the federal poverty line and are eligible for reduced price meals if their family's income is between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty line. Students whose household's income is above 185% of the federal poverty line can receive a low-cost, full-price lunch.

The research on the benefits of access to regular and nutritious school meals is clear. Students who receive free school meals have shown improved academic achievement, experience lower obesity rates, consume more fruits and vegetables, have a lower risk of behavioral issues, and have improved nutrition overall. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of nutritious meals disproportionately affected Black and Latinx children in the District, with 47% of Black households and approximately 52% of Latinx households with children reporting food insecurity, which is defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.¹

Pre-pandemic, 77% of children in the District received free or reduced-price school meals.² During the pandemic, the federal government implemented universal free school meals by issuing a waiver allowing schools to offer all students free school meals, regardless of income. This policy ended at the start of the 2022-2023 school year. Subsequent United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) analysis revealed that states that did not continue the

¹ 2023 Food System Assessment. DC Food Policy Council. <https://dcfoodpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/2023-food-system-assessment-1.pdf>

² The District of Columbia's School Meals Report for School Year 2018–2019. DC Hunger Solutions. https://www.dchunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/DCHS_School_Meals_Report_2018-2019.pdf



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universal free school meals policy experienced a 9.8% increase in food insufficiency, driven by students whose household incomes were just above the free and reduced school meals program's eligibility threshold.³ In addition to reducing food insufficiency for children because of a benefits cliff, universal free school meals reduces the social stigma that children who receive free and reduced price school meals experience.

As of April 2024, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, and Vermont passed laws or ballot initiatives to permanently supplement federal free school meals programs with local funds, making free and reduced-price breakfast and lunch available to all students throughout the school year. I am eager for the District to join this group of states, and the obstacles to doing so are minimal.

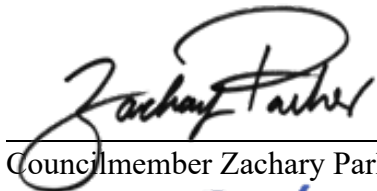
A 2022 D.C. Food Policy Council analysis estimated that universal free school meals would cost the District \$8 million annually.⁴ However, the USDA's 2023 expansion of the Community Eligibility Provision, which designates individual schools as eligible for universal free school meals depending on federal benefits programs participation, indicates that the cost to the District would now be considerably lower.⁵

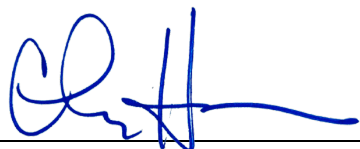
Grocery costs have risen, families whose income barely misses the free school meals eligibility cutoff struggle to feed their children, and many children in the District are hungry and experience food insecurity. We know from other states how to solve that issue. A measure of a city's greatness is how well it does by its children, and by ensuring that all children are nourished and can flourish in school, the District will live up to its ideals.


³ State Universal Free School Meal Policies Reduced Food Insufficiency Among Children in the 2022–2023 School Year. USDA. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2024/june/state-universal-free-school-meal-policies-reduced-food-insufficiency-among-children-in-the-2022-2023-school-year>


⁴ Universal Free School Meals for DC Students. DC Food Policy Council. <https://dcfoodpolicy.org/2022/12/16/universal-free-school-meals-in-dc/>


⁵ USDA Expands Access to School Breakfast and Lunch for More Students. USDA. <https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/news/press-releases/2023/09/26/usda-expands-access-school-breakfast-and-lunch-more-students>


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2 Councilmember Zachary Parker


Councilmember Christina Henderson

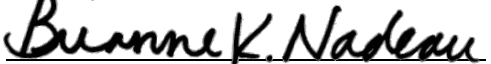
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6 Councilmember Robert C. White, Jr.



Councilmember Charles Allen

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10 Councilmember Janeese Lewis George


Councilmember Matthew Frumin

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13 Councilmember Brooke Pinto


Councilmember Brianne K. Nadeau

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17 Councilmember Kenyan R. McDuffie


Councilmember Anita Bonds

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21 AN ACT

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25 IN THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
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29 To provide universal free school meals and after school snacks to public school, public charter
30 school, and participating private school students in the District of Columbia.

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32 BE IT ENACTED BY THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, That this
33 act may be cited as the “Universal Free School Meals Amendment Act of 2025”.

34 Sec 2. The Healthy Schools Act of 2010, effective July 27, 2010 (D.C. Law 18-
35 20; D.C. Official Code § 38-822.01 *et seq.*), is amended by adding a new section 203b to read as
36 follows:

37 “Sec. 203b. Universal free school meals.

38 “(a) Beginning in School Year 2025-2026, and for every school year thereafter, public
39 schools, public charter schools, and private schools that participate in the National School Lunch

40 Program shall offer free breakfast, lunch, and after school snacks to all students, without
41 consideration of the student’s eligibility for a federally funded free or reduced-price meal.

42 “(b) The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (“OSSE”) shall reimburse
43 public schools, public charter schools, and participating private schools for meals provided to
44 students who are ineligible for a federally funded free or reduced-price meal.

45 “(c) OSSE shall ensure that all schools continue to receive federal reimbursements for
46 school meals for which they qualify, including the Community Eligibility Provision, the National
47 School Lunch Program, the National School Breakfast Program, and any available local
48 funding.

49 “(d) Reimbursements provided by OSSE shall not exceed the difference between the sum
50 of the amounts calculated for meals claimed based on the federal reimbursement rates for free
51 and reduced-price school meal and the full price of the meal provided to each student ineligible
52 for free and reduced-price meals.

53 “(e) OSSE shall provide training to school staff and administrators on how to implement
54 universal free school meals.

55 “(f) OSSE may issue rules to implement this section.”.

56 Sec. 3. Fiscal impact statement.

57 The Council adopts the fiscal impact statement in the committee report as the fiscal
58 impact statement required by section 4a of the General Legislative Procedures Act of 1975,
59 approved October 16, 2006 (120 Stat. 2038; D.C. Official Code § 1-301.47a).

60 Sec. 4. Effective date.

61 This act shall take effect following approval by the Mayor (or in the event of veto by the
62 Mayor, action by the Council to override the veto) and a 30-day period of congressional review

63 as provided in section 602(c)(1) of the District of Columbia Home Rule Act, approved December
64 24, 1973 (87 Stat. 813; D.C. Official Code § 1-206.02(c)(1).