

## There is Such a Thing as a Free Lunch

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While the old saying “there’s no such thing as a free lunch” reminds people that nothing in life is free; when it comes to children’s health, free lunch at school really is a good thing. Hungry children have difficulty learning. With up to [14% of families being food insecure](#) prior to the pandemic and as high as [56% because of the pandemic](#) in specific communities, millions of children across the country are not receiving adequate nutrition. The current free and reduced lunch programs in many communities help but are often stigmatizing and some children will not take advantage of them. In 2010, The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act included a Community Eligibility Provision that provided a financially viable option for schools to implement universal free lunch (UFL) based on the community prevalence of >40% eligibility.

Fortunately, in this month’s *Pediatrics*, we now have a roadmap on how to create a coalition to adopt UFL for a large school system. Watts et al describe a collaborative effort in New York City to adopt UFL for the over 1 million children in their system ([10.1542/peds.2020-049734](#)). Their process included: (1) strategic coalition building of the Lunch 4 Learning campaign – a coalition of students, parents, school-based unions, teachers, pediatricians, community leaders, and children’s advocacy organizations – to bring UFL to all NYC public schools; (2) building political support; (3) developing a media strategy; and 4) using an evidence-based strategy to overcome political, administrative, and procedural challenges. They successfully brought UFL to all NYC public schools in 2017 – which I am sure was extremely helpful in responding to the increasing rates of food insecurity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This blueprint can be followed by other communities and highlights the importance of community advocacy by pediatricians and American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) State Chapters. Now more than ever we need to make sure that we do everything we can to reduce food insecurity for children. If you aren’t familiar with the AAP Council on [Community Pediatrics Food Insecurity Tool Kit](#), please check it out. The toolkit offers simple screening tools for the office, helpful resources, and advocacy tips for changing policies in your community to help reduce hunger. Use the current article with the tool kit and help reduce the effects of hunger and food insecurity where you live and work.

### Related Links:

- [Better Diet Quality in the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act and WIC Package Reduced Childhood Obesity](#)
- [Addressing Pandemic-Intensified Food Insecurity](#)
- [Timing of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Benefits and Families’ Home Food Environments](#)

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