

## Kids are hungry, why wait?

By: Peter Spadafore

Unfortunately, there are hungry kids in every community. No one can thrive on an empty stomach. Hunger consumes us. It affects our moods and takes up all our attention. And if you're a student, hunger takes your focus away from your lessons and away from learning. When you're hungry, there's no homework pressing enough, no test important enough, to make you forget the pangs of hunger.

That's why Michigan must act now to provide every child in the state access to free school meals. Fortunately, there's a plan to do that.

According to [Feeding America](#), one in nine Michiganders faces hunger and one in seven Michigan children are systemically hungry. This epidemic disproportionately affects students of color, children from single-parent households, and residents of rural communities. Hunger impacts our young people in many ways, such as increasing the chances of repeating an elementary grade, language or motor skill impairment, and social or behavioral problems. Academic performance drops when food is scarce. That's not just a Michigan problem, it's a national problem – one that touches every state.

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP), signed into law by President Harry Truman in 1946, has provided millions of students nutritionally balanced, low-cost or no-cost lunches each school day. However, for various reasons, countless children slip through the cracks and remain hungry. Many families may fear the stigma associated with free lunch, which can include a separate line, special lunch tickets, or many other ways the system requires a demarcation between NSLP eligible students and those who pack their lunch or pay cash. Sometimes family income fluctuations move a family out of that eligibility window, but food scarcity remains an issue. Kids are hungry, whether their family meets a federal litmus test or not.

In 2010, Congress passed the Healthy, Hunger-free Kids Act creating the Community Eligibility Program (CEP) which allows schools where 40 percent or more of students are eligible for the NSLP to offer free meals to all students, regardless of family income or demonstrated need. This program has been successful in providing millions more students with access to nutrition at school. There's a growing body of research that suggests that universal school meal programs like CEP have a positive impact on student achievement and potential reductions in disciplinary actions. There's only so far this program can go though.

We have the opportunity before us to ensure that the nearly 300,000 Michigan children going to school each day ill-prepared to learn without proper nutrition are well-fed once they get there. But we must act now.

Governor Gretchen Whitmer has proposed providing free school meals to all 1.4 million Michigan students, regardless of whether a family meets a bureaucratic definition of need. This move would make Michigan the fifth state in the nation to invest in feeding every child and save Michigan families an average of \$850 a year.

Michigan has the chance to make a serious dent in childhood hunger, remove stigma, and bring down barriers to learning by making school meals available to all Michigan students. But time is of the essence.

The Michigan Alliance for Student Opportunity calls on lawmakers to come together to take swift action on a supplemental budget to make universal access to school meals a reality for every Michigan child. Michigan's children depend on it.



*Peter Spadafore is the executive director of the Michigan Alliance for Student Opportunity. The Alliance is a group of member school districts that serve students with the greatest educational needs. We advocate on their behalf to build an equitable foundation for education, so every student has the opportunities they need to succeed in school and beyond.*