



(Wikimedia Commons/U.S. Department of Agriculture)



by Dwayne David Paul

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@DwayneDavidPaul](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

September 10, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Once Vice President Kamala Harris named Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz as her running mate, Walz's policy achievements entered the national discussion. Among the most important bills he signed into law as governor was the Free School Meals for Kids bill that went into effect [July 1, 2023](#). The law builds upon the National School Lunch Program and the National School Breakfast Program to make free school meals a universal benefit to all Minnesota students.

While it is too early to measure the outcomes of the program for Minnesota students, publicly funded school meals have been around in one form or another long enough for us to know that this is effective policy worthy of Catholics getting behind at the national level.

An important feature of Minnesota's free school meals law is that by universalizing the benefit, lawmakers removed all the foibles that accompany means testing and other forms of parsing out which hungry children deserve to eat.

Means testing is as American as apple pie — it always seems like a good idea, but it's not good for you. Means testing adds significant administrative costs that often make the programs they are applied to [more expensive](#) than universal ones. Additionally, universal programs have the added benefit of greater participation by removing barriers to entry.

Finally, universal free school meals account for the fact that many more American families are struggling financially than can be captured by the current standards that are pegged to the federal poverty line. Meals are free for students in households earning up to 130% of the federal poverty line (\$40,560 for a family of four), and discounted for students above that and up to 185% (\$57,720 for a family of four). Indeed, a [2024 study](#) from the U.S. Department of Agriculture found that expanded meal eligibility was a boon for families earning more than 185% of the federal poverty limit (and thus paying full price) but under 250%.

The National School Lunch Act of 1946, which created the National School Lunch Program, passed with broad support as the embers of World War II still smoldered, in part because malnutrition was a key category of Selective Service rejections. In the decades since, one thing is clear: However imperfect, the program is effective at addressing childhood hunger.

A 2021 meta-analysis of [47 studies](#) on the subject found that free school meal programs were likely associated with higher household income for low-income families, and most of the studies found that universal free lunch programs boosted students' academic performance, food security and overall diet quality.

Advertisement

Public policy does not happen in a vacuum. Policies can usually be leveraged to address problems beyond their primary focus, and universally free school meals are no different. That's why many advocates, like those in my home state of [Connecticut](#), urge lawmakers to frame these bills in ways that incentivize school coordination with local and regional farmers. Such an arrangement offers benefits to schoolchildren, local farmers and local economies.

This emphasis on regional agricultural goods provides opportunities for kids to eat nutritious, culturally relevant food, as well as opportunities to learn at local farms. Food systems are a complex web of natural and social scientific information, governance and economics. School and farm collaborations can provide ample material for fruitful study — pun not intended (but thoroughly enjoyed!) — as well as stimulate local economies.

There are many other reasons why free school meal programs are good public policy, rooted in economics and social sciences. The most important reason, however, is moral: All the children are ours.

For Catholics, this position flows from the church's teaching on the place of the poor and otherwise vulnerable in the church's worldview: that God has a special love for them, that we ought to emulate that special love in our interpersonal dealings and that society ought to be organized in a way that reflects that pride of place. Childhood is definitionally marked by vulnerability that impresses upon those of us who have made it to the other side a moral responsibility to provide care.

America brutalizes its children. That might seem hyperbolic, and even counterintuitive given the abundance of "kids these days" commentary. The evidence, however, is damning. Child labor law [violations](#) are at their highest in decades, the U.S. still leads the industrialized world in rates of child [incarceration](#), and [one in five](#) children — approximately 13 million — experience food insecurity.

There is no single policy move that the government can take to reverse these complex trends, but making sure kids aren't hungry during the school day would be an important first step.

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 11-24, 2024** print issue under the headline: Walz is right about free school meals — and Catholics should care.