

Low-Income Vermont Students Get Free Breakfast

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Seventy-five hundred Vermont students will have access to free school breakfast for the first time this fall, as a new initiative by the Vermont legislature goes into effect. Families who earn between 130-185% of the federal poverty threshold—between \$27,000 and \$38,000 for a family of 4—previously had to pay a reduced price for breakfast. School food service directors from around Vermont have reported that these students often go without breakfast because they are saving their money for lunch. As a result, these low-income students eat breakfast only about half as often as students who qualify for a free breakfast.

This year, the Vermont Legislature became the fourth in the nation to fund free breakfast for all low-income students in those schools that offer the federal breakfast program. In addition to benefitting low-income students, this state money will bring an estimated \$280,000 of federal matching funds into Vermont school meal programs. Providing free breakfast to low-income students will especially benefit families this coming winter when household budgets will be very tight.

Research has shown the importance of school breakfast for health and learning. Breakfast improves nutrition, prevents obesity, boosts students' achievement, and reduces discipline problems in school. However, many families find it hard to provide a healthy and filling morning meal for their children, especially as they struggle with low wages, morning commutes, and work schedules, as well as some children's reluctance to eat when they first awake. As a result, many children miss out on breakfast. The School Breakfast Program helps ensure that students have the nutrition they need to be productive in school.

The Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger (VTCECH) has worked with schools across the state since 1990 to assist them in starting breakfast programs. This work has increased the percentage of Vermont schools offering breakfast from 13% to 92%, making Vermont seventh in the nation in providing school breakfast to low-income children. VTCECH also works with schools to improve participation in existing breakfast programs. Some of the most successful strategies include offering breakfast in the classroom at snack time for elementary schools and offering breakfast between classes in high schools. When more students eat breakfast, their health and well-being improves and the school meal program has lower per-meal costs and is more successful.

Editor's Note: Dorigen Keeney is the director of public policy and research at VTCECH. More information on VTCECH, hunger in Vermont, and federal nutrition programs is available at www.vtnohunger.org.