

The Majority of Adults Support Permanent, Free School Meals for All Students

Emily Gutierrez

Adults living with children enrolled in school were **more likely to support making free school meals permanent** (76 percent) than adults not living with children enrolled in school (67 percent).

Of adults living with schoolchildren, **60 percent strongly supported permanent free meals** compared with 51 percent of adults not living with schoolchildren.

Twenty percent of adults not living with children enrolled in school were indifferent, **neither supporting or opposing a permanent change**, compared to 16 percent of those living with schoolchildren.

Only 8 percent of adults living with schoolchildren opposed making free school meals permanent for all, compared to 12 percent of those not living with schoolchildren.

During the 2020–21 and 2021–22 school years, school meals were free for all students after the USDA implemented federal child nutrition waivers as part of the pandemic response. However, the waivers are set to expire on June 30, 2022, meaning schools nationwide will once again rely on individual student eligibility to determine whether students pay a full or reduced price or receive school meals for free.

In December 2021, almost 70 percent of adults reported supporting permanent free school meals for all students according to the Urban Institute’s Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey. About 1 in 5 adults were indifferent, whereas about 1 in 10 opposed permanently making school meals free.

The majority of adults, regardless of whether they lived with children enrolled in school, supported universal free school meals (figure 1).

Among adults living with schoolchildren, support for (and opposition to) permanent free school meals followed a similar trend across household earnings (figure 2).

- The vast majority of adults living with schoolchildren reported supporting permanent free meals—about 4 out of 5 with earnings below 200 percent of the federal poverty level and about 7 out of 10 with earnings above it.
- Only 14 to 16 percent of adults who live with children reported being indifferent.
- About 10 percent of adults in households earning over 200 percent of the federal poverty level reported somewhat or strongly opposing free meals, compared to just 4 percent earning below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

The child nutrition waivers raised awareness that nationwide free school meals for all were possible and needed (see <https://bit.ly/3QiRz18>), causing federal legislators to propose universal free meals for students nationwide with little success (see <https://bit.ly/3mNRbu3> and <https://bit.ly/3b2Gxgo>).

FIGURE 1

Share of Adults Who Support Permanent Free School Meals, by Child School Enrollment

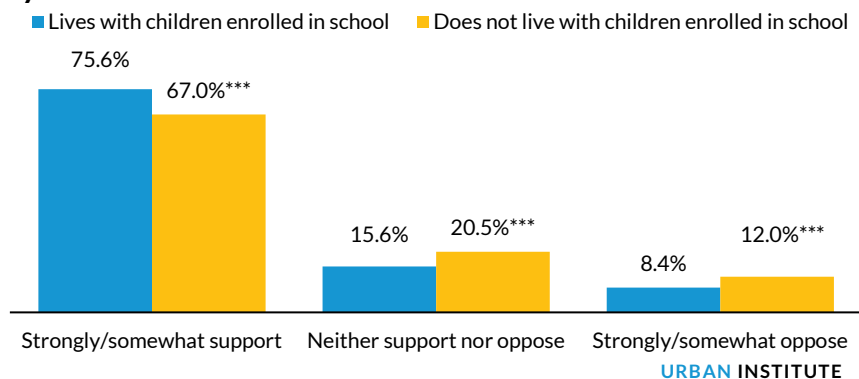
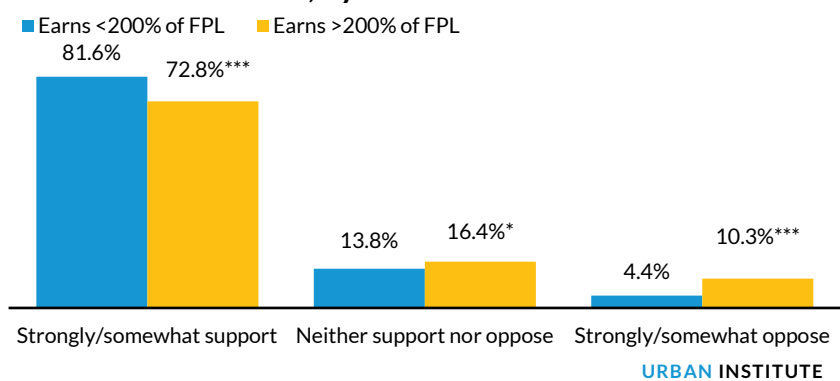


FIGURE 2

Share of Adults Living with Schoolchildren Who Support Permanent Free Lunch, by Household Income



Source: Urban Institute Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2021.

Notes: FPL = federal poverty level. Estimates are not shown for the 0.5 percent of adults who did not report whether they had heard about the recent change to school lunches or the 0.4 percent of adults who did not report whether they support a permanent change making free school lunches available to all students.

Figure 1 *** Estimate differs significantly from adults living with children ages 5 to 18 who are enrolled in public or private school at the 0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

Figure 2 */*** Estimate differs significantly from adults living with children ages 5 to 18 who are enrolled in public or private school and earn less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level at the 0.10/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

ADDITIONAL READING

New Measures of Student Poverty

Erica Greenberg <https://urban.is/3xR0Cza>

Community Eligibility Provision

USDA <https://bit.ly/3HpToFr>

Districts Anxious About Plunge in Meal-Program Applicants

Daarel Burnette II <https://bit.ly/3MR2Vqe>

California Universal Meals

CA Department of Education <https://bit.ly/39rPnDX>

Healthy Meals for All Public School Students

Colorado General Assembly <https://bit.ly/3aZdo5R>

As Universal School Meals Program Nears End, Biden Eyes Other Ways to Get Food to School Kids

Meredith Lee <https://politi.co/3MW3BL6>

WHAT IS NEXT?

School meal administrators are worried. Before the pandemic, many eligible families did not submit meal applications because of the availability of free meals and stigma concerns, and the past two years of free meals will make it harder to provide eligible students with the meals they need for these same reasons.

The expiring federal waivers also granted school meal administrators flexibility around federal nutrition requirements and financial penalties because supply chain issues had resulted in difficulties sourcing school foods. However, the Biden administration is looking to make \$1 billion available by the end of the month to help schools purchase school food amid continuing supply chain disruptions.

No federal decision on universal free meals has been made, but some states, such as California, have taken matters into their own hands, creating systems that require free school meals for all students in the state. Others, such as Colorado, have proposals awaiting decisions.

DATA AND METHODS

This fact sheet draws on the December 2021 Urban Institute's Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, a nationally representative, internet-based survey of adults ages 18 to 64. See <https://urban.is/3tC9KFd>.