

Policy Brief: Estimated Impact of Universal School Breakfast in Central Pennsylvania

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania committed to provide free breakfasts to all of its schoolchildren during the 2022-2023 school year. Statewide, about 800,000 children became newly eligible for breakfast at no cost, on top of the 900,000 who were already traditionally certified. This means a total of 1.7 million school-aged children are eligible for free breakfast in Pennsylvania.

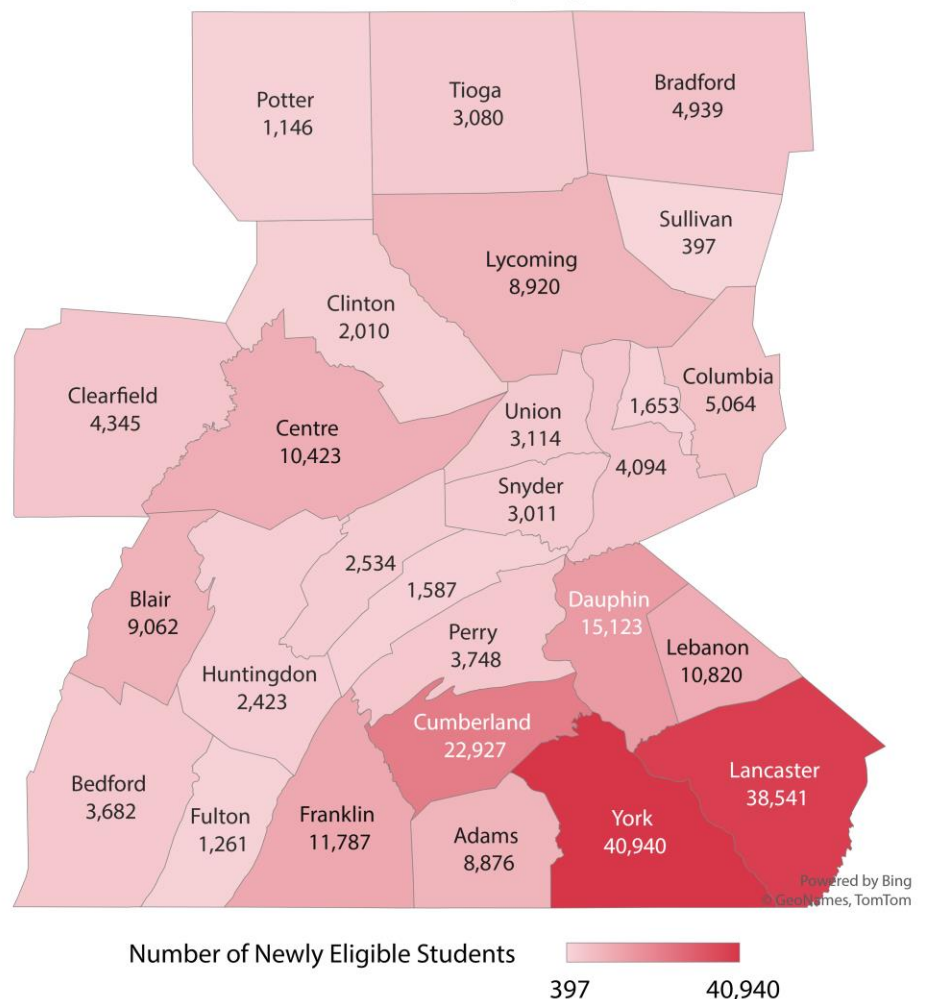
Expanded access to free breakfasts is a well-targeted and effective policy. In Pennsylvania, children are 80% more likely to be food insecure than adults, according to Feeding America’s 2022 Map the Meal Gap report.

- As of 2020, there were about 436,000 food insecure children under the age of 18 in the Commonwealth. Expanding school breakfasts will direct at least \$21.5 million of additional funding to Pennsylvania’s public schools and could help leverage additional federal resources.
- Across the 27 counties that comprise the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank’s service territory, there are about 225,000 public school children who may now receive free breakfast in addition to the 174,000 students who were already eligible.

York County has the most newly eligible children of any CPFEB county, at nearly 41,000 students, followed by Lancaster (about 38,500 students), Cumberland (nearly 23,000 students), and Dauphin (about 15,000 students).

In general, the most populous counties had the greatest increase of eligible students, but some counties, such as Lancaster, already had a substantial proportion of students eligible for free breakfast due to some districts’ or schools’ use of the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). CEP allows schools in high-need areas to provide breakfasts and lunches to all students at no charge and without any paperwork requirements.

Estimated Number of Newly Eligible Students



Increased eligibility does not automatically result in increased or universal participation in school breakfast.

Central Pennsylvania schools that already had universal eligibility through CEP only had a 61% average participation rate in 2019.

Participation rates may be lower than expected in CEP school districts due to time-based access barriers; even when breakfast is free to all students, if it is only served before school starts, students may not arrive in time to eat due to tight schedules or transportation delays. Alternative breakfast models, such as breakfast in the classroom for elementary schoolers and grab-and-go or second-chance breakfast in secondary schools, can help increase student access to

breakfast and therefore participation rates in situations like these, though it is important to note that school districts may also face staffing challenges that make offering breakfast for a longer time or via an alternative model difficult.

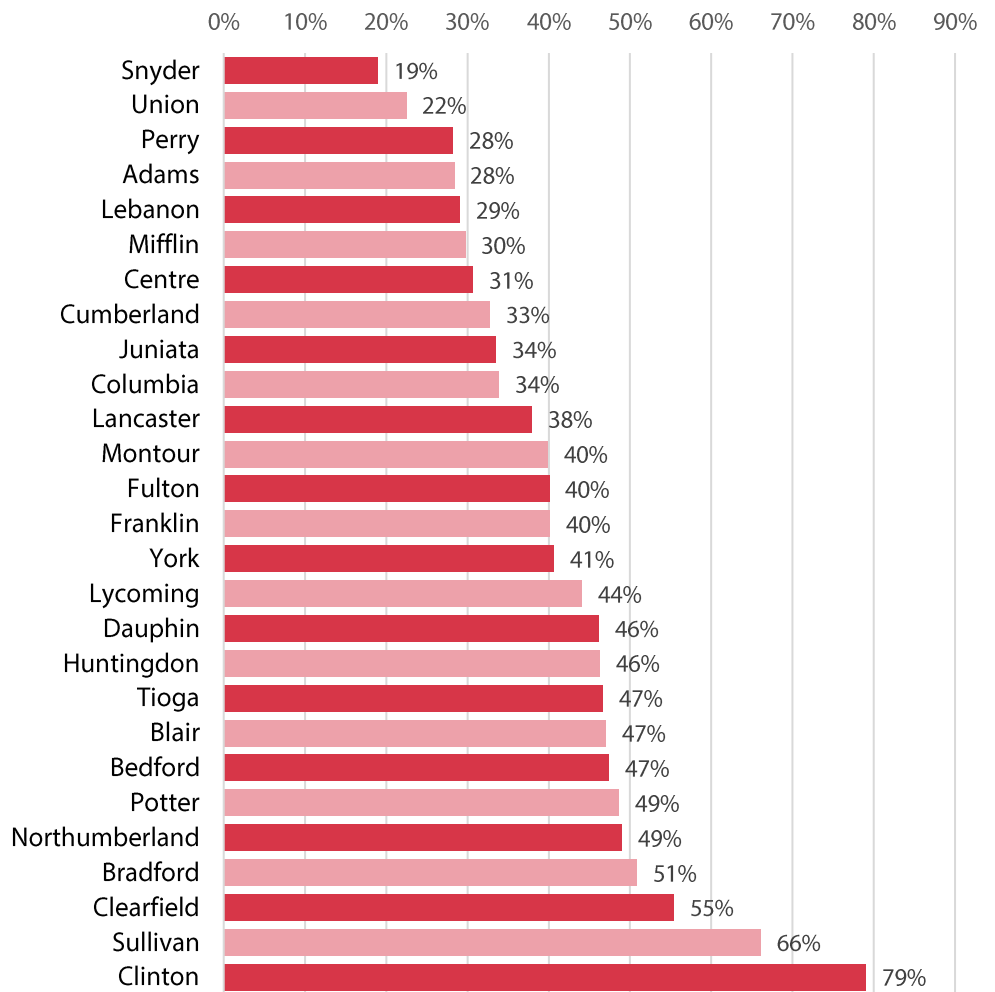
Across all public schools in CPF counties, the average breakfast participation rate in 2019 was 40%. Clinton County had by far the highest participation rate at 79%, nearly twice the average; Snyder was lowest and just slightly below half the regional average at only 19%.

If participation remains flat from 2019, the additional revenue generated for central Pennsylvania’s public schools by this eligibility expansion can be estimated at \$7.2 million for the 2022-2023 school year. Of the CPF’s counties, York County can receive the most additional revenue, at about \$1.2 million, followed by Lancaster at \$783,000, Dauphin at \$508,000, and Cumberland at \$445,000.

School breakfasts help students focus on their schoolwork, and school breakfasts leverage existing underutilized federal funding.

About 16.5% of Pennsylvania’s children were food insecure in 2020, and about 18% of these children lived in households that were above the income thresholds for free or reduced-price meals ([Feeding America](#)). Access to school breakfast allows food insecure families faced with high inflation to stretch their food budgets further whether they previously qualified for free breakfast or not. The universality of the program also saves children

Average Breakfast Participation Rate vs. Lunch, 2019



from the stigma about who is eating breakfast at school and why. However, stakeholders must act to help as many children as possible with free breakfasts.

- **Until the program ends, school districts are encouraged to use the additional funds to implement alternative breakfast models that maximize the impact of the current expansion.**
 - Alternative breakfast service models, such as breakfast in the classroom in elementary schools and grab-and-go or second chance breakfast in secondary schools, [are proven to increase school breakfast participation.](#)
- **Community stakeholders should work with schools, particularly those that qualify for universal free breakfasts under the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), to implement alternative breakfast models.**
 - Many CEP school districts in the CPF's service territory have below-average participation rates and are not taking full advantage of federal funding opportunities to help children.
 - These schools are also located in areas that have the highest child poverty and child food insecurity rates in the CPF's service territory.
- **In advocacy and policy work, anti-hunger advocates should encourage state policymakers to make universal free meals permanent in Pennsylvania.**
 - The one-year expansion of breakfast eligibility presents an enormous opportunity to build support for making the program permanent, or even to make all school meals free to all students in perpetuity, [as Maine and California have done.](#) Legislation was introduced last session in the Pennsylvania General Assembly that would [make school meals free for all students, permanently.](#)
 - The impact of the single-year breakfast expansion and the success of the COVID-19 waivers and programs in other states provide compelling evidence of how universal meal programs can work.

School meals provide in-kind support to food insecure children in a setting in which they are already comfortable. Like SNAP, school meals are convenient and effective for families. By supporting school meal expansion, anti-hunger advocates can help ensure that every child has the nutrition needed to focus and learn effectively.

Methods

This analysis was conducted using School Year 2019-2020 Child Nutrition Program participation data sourced from the Pennsylvania Department of Education and 2022-2023 financial reimbursement rate formulae from the United States Department of Agriculture.

The specific programs assessed are the School Breakfast Program, including Severe Need Breakfast (referred to together as SBP or school breakfast throughout this analysis), and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP or school lunch). Because the Child and Adult Food Care Program (CACFP), the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) are not impacted by the school breakfast eligibility expansion, they are not included in this analysis.

Due to data limitations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the meal program waivers put in place to respond to it, reliable and comparable SBP and NSLP participation statistics are not available for school years more recent than 2019-2020 as of the time of writing. All financial estimates, unless it is specifically noted otherwise, are made with the assumption that increased eligibility has no impact on participation rates. This means that the actual value of the additional reimbursement schools may receive will likely be greater than those discussed above.

Annualized figures for meals served and reimbursement rate have been calculated by annualizing one month of service (October 2019), in accordance with the methods used by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) when discussing the school-based child nutrition programs. This method allows for unduplicated enrollment and eligibility numbers to be used, while also providing a reasonable value for annual service. All annualized figures assume approximately 35 weeks of school meal service.

Breakfast participation rates are expressed as a percentage of lunches served, such that a 30% participation rate indicates that 30 of 100, or three in ten, children who ate lunch ate breakfast as well. This method is also in accordance with those used by FRAC.

Finally, although private or parochial schools and public and private residential childcare institutions are eligible to participate in SBP and/or NSLP, they have been excluded from this analysis, as public school enrollees comprise the overwhelming majority (97.8%) of students attending schools that participate in SBP or NSLP in the CPF's service territory, and program operation at private or residential institutions may not be directly comparable to operations in public schools.

Appendix A: Table of Student Eligibility and Expected Reimbursement

County	Total Enrollment	Students Previously Eligible for Free Meals	Percentage of Total Students Previously Eligible for Free Meals	Number of Students Newly Eligible for Free Meals	Percentage of Total Students Newly Eligible for Free Meals	Number of Students Previously Eligible for Reduced Price Meals	Percentage of Newly Eligible Students Previously Reduced	Number of Students Previously Eligible for Paid Meals	Percentage of Newly Eligible Students Previously Paid	Average Breakfast Participation Rate	Additional Funding to Public Schools, SY2022-2023	Expected Additional Funding per Newly Eligible Student
Adams	13,799	4,923	35.7%	8,876	64.3%	708	8.0%	8,168	92.0%	28.4%	\$65,344	\$7.36
Bedford	6,557	2,875	43.8%	3,682	56.2%	377	10.2%	3,305	89.8%	47.4%	\$26,440	\$7.18
Blair	17,188	8,126	47.3%	9,062	52.7%	775	8.6%	8,287	91.4%	47.0%	\$66,296	\$7.32
Bradford	9,279	4,340	46.8%	4,939	53.2%	559	11.3%	4,380	88.7%	50.8%	\$35,040	\$7.09
Centre	13,196	2,773	21.0%	10,423	79.0%	463	4.4%	9,960	95.6%	30.7%	\$79,680	\$7.64
Clearfield	11,085	6,740	60.8%	4,345	39.2%	280	6.4%	4,065	93.6%	55.4%	\$32,520	\$7.48
Clinton	4,239	2,229	52.6%	2,010	47.4%	308	15.3%	1,702	84.7%	79.0%	\$13,616	\$6.77
Columbia	9,433	4,369	46.3%	5,064	53.7%	314	6.2%	4,750	93.8%	33.9%	\$38,000	\$7.50
Cumberland	31,975	9,048	28.3%	22,927	71.7%	1,228	5.4%	21,699	94.6%	32.7%	\$173,592	\$7.57
Dauphin	36,141	21,018	58.2%	15,123	41.8%	855	5.7%	14,268	94.3%	46.1%	\$114,144	\$7.55
Franklin	20,959	9,172	43.8%	11,787	56.2%	1,207	10.2%	10,580	89.8%	40.2%	\$84,640	\$7.18
Fulton	2,134	873	40.9%	1,261	59.1%	79	6.3%	1,182	93.7%	40.1%	\$9,456	\$7.50
Huntingdon	5,081	2,658	52.3%	2,423	47.7%	228	9.4%	2,195	90.6%	46.3%	\$17,560	\$7.25
Juniata	2,595	1,008	38.8%	1,587	61.2%	132	8.3%	1,455	91.7%	33.5%	\$11,640	\$7.33
Lancaster	68,412	29,871	43.7%	38,541	56.3%	2,795	7.3%	35,746	92.7%	38.0%	\$285,968	\$7.42
Lebanon	20,636	9,816	47.6%	10,820	52.4%	619	5.7%	10,201	94.3%	29.1%	\$81,608	\$7.54
Lycoming	15,793	6,873	43.5%	8,920	56.5%	744	8.3%	8,176	91.7%	44.1%	\$65,408	\$7.33
Mifflin	4,899	2,365	48.3%	2,534	51.7%	276	10.9%	2,258	89.1%	29.8%	\$18,064	\$7.13
Montour	2,449	796	32.5%	1,653	67.5%	86	5.2%	1,567	94.8%	39.9%	\$12,536	\$7.58
Northumberland	12,043	7,949	66.0%	4,094	34.0%	269	6.6%	3,825	93.4%	49.0%	\$30,600	\$7.47
Perry	5,997	2,249	37.5%	3,748	62.5%	334	8.9%	3,414	91.1%	28.2%	\$27,312	\$7.29
Potter	2,236	1,090	48.7%	1,146	51.3%	126	11.0%	1,020	89.0%	48.7%	\$8,160	\$7.12
Snyder	4,889	1,878	38.4%	3,011	61.6%	335	11.1%	2,676	88.9%	19.0%	\$21,408	\$7.11
Sullivan	601	204	33.9%	397	66.1%	41	10.3%	356	89.7%	66.1%	\$2,848	\$7.17
Tioga	5,555	2,475	44.6%	3,080	55.4%	320	10.4%	2,760	89.6%	46.7%	\$22,080	\$7.17
Union	4,396	1,282	29.2%	3,114	70.8%	245	7.9%	2,869	92.1%	22.5%	\$22,952	\$7.37
York	68,389	27,449	40.1%	40,940	59.9%	2,967	7.2%	37,973	92.8%	40.7%	\$303,784	\$7.42
Grand Total	399,956	174,449	43.6%	225,507	56.4%	16,670	7.4%	208,837	92.6%	40.1%	\$1,670,696	\$7.41