

# Lunch at risk for millions of kids

## Plan to close 'loopholes' could squeeze schools

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USA TODAY

Nearly 1 million low-income students would lose automatic access to free school lunches under a proposal from President Donald Trump's administration that aims to limit the number of people receiving federal food stamps.

And advocates say even more could lose free meals as the implications of the cuts ripple across low-income schools. But the Trump administration says those concerns are overblown.

The administration is working to trim the cost of food assistance programs and close what it views as "loopholes" regarding who qualifies for them.

Kids whose families are on federal food stamps automatically get free lunch at school. A new government analysis has estimated 982,000 students would lose that qualification if the Trump plan passes.

The new analysis has school nutrition experts, charities that help the poor and even the American Bar Association saying the proposal will needlessly harm low-income children and challenge the schools that serve them.

"It's in the school's best interest to make sure kids have access to a free school breakfast and lunch so they can focus and achieve academically," said Crystal FitzSimons, a director at the Food Research & Action Center, an advocacy group that works to reduce hunger and under-nutrition caused by poverty.

The children at risk of losing automatic free lunches are connected to some of the approximately 3 million people expected to lose their food stamps - officially known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - under the Trump plan, which was released in July.

Some critics also worry the proposal could imperil a special provision some high-poverty schools use to provide universal free meals to all students without collecting any paperwork. Their fear: As kids lose access to free lunches



The Trump administration says fears over its plan to trim the cost of federal food assistance are overblown. AP

via SNAP, their schools could drop below the threshold for the government to pay for everyone's lunches.

But U.S. Department of Agriculture officials said they expect the vast majority of schools using that provision to be able to do so even if the administration's proposal passes.

They also said the majority of children from households receiving SNAP benefits still would be eligible for free and reduced-price meals in school. But their families would have to apply for them individually instead of being approved automatically.

People with opinions about the proposal can submit comments by Friday.

### Paperwork, or paying for lunch

Of the nearly 1 million children whose households would lose food stamps, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service estimates nearly half of them will still qualify for free lunch if their families fill out applications.

Another half a million children would lose their automatic free lunches and be eligible only for reduced-price meals, which cost 40 cents for lunch and 30 cents for breakfast. Their families also would have to apply for those benefits.

Another 40,000 children now receiving free meals would have to switch to paying the full cost of a school lunch.

The Trump administration's proposal would cut off food stamps to people who qualify now only because they are enrolled in food assistance programs run by their state. Those people live in states with slightly more generous eligibility guidelines than what SNAP requires. Federal rules let those states sign people up for SNAP benefits.

### Food stamps 'keep the lights on'

The biggest concern, advocates say, is how the cut in federal food stamps will increase hunger for kids at school who will be losing significant assistance at home.

"Just getting families to apply for the meals is going to be a challenge," said Diane Pratt-Heavner, spokeswoman for the School Nutrition Association, which represents about 58,000 school cafeteria workers and nutrition managers at school districts across the country.

She said families often don't know they must apply for free and reduced-price lunches. Others don't realize they have to reapply annually. Still others won't apply at all because they're work-

ing two jobs, or they forget, or they're immigrants who are wary of applying for benefits, she said.

"The concern is that there will be kids lost in this transition," Pratt-Heavner said.

In rural upstate New York, Deana Ferrusi is a single mother who receives \$80 in SNAP benefits for groceries each month. Her daughter receives free lunch at school. As a receptionist at a dentist's office, Ferrusi said she earns about \$27,000 annually in gross income. Her job does not offer benefits.

The food assistance benefit "keeps my lights on," Ferrusi said.

Ferrusi said it would be difficult to lose that supplement. Her income is low enough that her daughter is likely to qualify still for free meals at school, though she would probably have to apply rather than being automatically certified through SNAP.

### Universal free meals

Then there's the question of whether the food stamp changes could jeopardize some schools' ability to extend free meals to all students without collecting any paperwork from families.

About 13.7 million children attend schools where everyone eats free, according to the USDA. About 9.9 million of those children are in schools in states that would be affected by the SNAP cuts.

Schools and districts qualify if at least 40% of students are automatically certified for free school lunch, because their parents receive SNAP or other public assistance, or because the students are from vulnerable groups, like being homeless or in foster care.

If the population of kids who automatically qualify for free meals through SNAP shrinks significantly, a school may no longer reach the 40% threshold needed to qualify for the provision.

"We definitely are concerned," said Michael Rosenberger, head of food and nutrition at the Dallas Independent School District in Texas.

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