

**Families' Experiences with Access to Universal Free School Meals During the COVID-19
Pandemic**

by

Stacey R. Philbrick

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

Department of Education

School of Social Sciences and Education

Milligan University, Tennessee

March 2023

Dissertation Committee Chair: Dr. Mark Dula

Dissertation Committee Member: Dr. Janet Faulk

Dissertation Committee Member: Dr. Angela Hilton-Prillhart

Copyright 2023 by Stacey Philbrick

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

COMMITTEE SIGNATURE PAGE

Milligan University Dissertation Defense Approval Form

Candidate Name: Stacey Philbrick

Date of Defense: 03/23/2023


Dissertation Title: Families' Experiences with Access to Universal Free School Meals During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Final Approval of Dissertation Defense:

A signature Below indicates committee members agree with the following:

- 1) Agreement that the dissertation meets with the committee's approval.
- 2) Agreement that the oral defense of the dissertation was successful.

Dissertation Chair Signature/Date:

 3/23/23


Committee Member Signature/Date:

Angela Hilton Pulliam / 03/23/23

Committee Member Signature/Date:

Jenet Blomer 03/23/2023

Research Director Signature/Date:

 3/23/23

Area Chair Signature/Date:

Angela Hilton Pulliam

ABSTRACT

Families' Experiences with Access to Universal Free School Meals During the COVID-19

Pandemic

by

Stacey Philbrick

This qualitative study aimed to gather and analyze the experiences of families with access to universal free meals offered through the MEALS Act and the COVID-19 Child Nutrition Response Act. Significant research exists on the positive effects of federal free and reduced meal programs (Bartfeld & Dunifon, 2006; Gordanier et al., 2020; Gunderson et al., 2011; Kinsey et al., 2020; Mykerezi & Mills, 2010; Ratcliffe et al., 2011; Ruffini, 2022; Turner et al., 2019). However, the impact of access to free meals for all students through the MEALS Act and the COVID-19 Child Nutrition Response Act enacted during COVID-19 needs further examination.

This research involved interviews with eight parents of students in a public school district in Tennessee. The participants were parents of students in the first through eighth grades whose students participated in free school meals during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years and are no longer eligible for free meals due to incomes above the eligibility threshold. Participants described their experiences through semi-structured, open-ended interview questions.

In addition, meal participation rates for the district were reviewed beginning with the 2018-2019 school year through December 2022. Overall participation rates, as well as rates by subgroup were reviewed. Meal participation rates in the district increased for students with reduced and paid statuses when meals were free for all students.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family. To my husband, Clint, thank you for your constant support and encouragement throughout this process. You are always in my corner, cheering for me and having my back. Without your support, none of this would have been possible. Thank you, I love you. To my children, Jake, Addy, and Ruby, thank you for your understanding as I pursued this degree. Your willingness to support me in this process was an important part of my success. I hope that you see this as a success that we all share, and remember that you can accomplish anything you put your mind to because I will always be there to support you. I love you.

To my parents, Len and Rhonda, thank you for ensuring that my education was a priority and instilling a strong work ethic in me. To my in-laws, Ron and Debbie, thank you for watching our kids every week so that I could attend my classes. To my grandfather, Elmer Ruffner, who passed away during my pursuit of this degree, thank you for always being so excited about my educational pursuits. You always emphasized the importance of education as a vital part of my future. To my sister, Leigh, I know that you are looking down on me with pride. To my brother, Matt, tag, you're it.

With gratitude, I dedicate this work to the students that I work with every day. Thank you for trusting me and sharing your lives with me. I am honored to do this work and to be a school counselor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This journey could not have been completed without the educational support of the faculty at Milligan. To my dissertation chair, Dr. Mark Dula, thank you for your kindness, guidance, and support. To my dissertation committee members, Dr. Janet Faulk and Dr. Angela Hilton-Prillhart, thank you for your continuous feedback and suggestions and your willingness to serve and share your expertise. Thank you to Dr. Holly Flora, Dr. Renee Wood, and Mr. Todd Barnett for mentoring and guiding me. Learning from each of you over the past two years was an incredible experience for me. Your commitment to students and families is unparalleled.

To my cohort friends, my Girl Gang, I could not have gotten to this point without you all. Having others to walk this road with was invaluable for me. Your friendship and support were instrumental in my success. Thank you for pushing me to catch up and be a full-time student alongside you all. This path was better because we were on it together.

Thank you to my school counselor friends. To Garrett McDonald, although not an official member of the girl gang, it was wonderful to take these classes with you and to apply our role as school counselors to this coursework. I am thankful that you, Stephanie Gibson, and Kimberly Thompson were part of this journey. To Dr. Holly English, thank you for helping me brainstorm this topic. Your encouragement was instrumental in my continued pursuit of this topic when conversations were tough. It is important, and I appreciate your encouragement not to give up. Thank you for trailblazing this path for other school counselors to follow. To Seth Johns, thanks for always providing a listening ear when I needed to complain, often.

To my friends, Heather, Joanna, and Kim, thank you for supporting me along the way. You all have been a constant source of support and encouragement for me. Heather, thank you

for sharing your wealth of dissertation knowledge; seeing you complete this journey was inspiring.

To everyone who chose to share their experiences with me through interviews, thank you for sharing stories about your families and children. Thank you for trusting me to portray your story accurately. Thank you for caring about this topic.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| Abstract..... | 4 |
| Dedication..... | 5 |
| Acknowledgments..... | 6 |
| Table of Contents..... | 8 |
| Chapter One | |
| Introduction..... | 12 |
| Statement of the Problem..... | 13 |
| Statement of the Purpose..... | 14 |
| Research Question..... | 14 |
| Significance of the Study..... | 15 |
| Definition of Terms..... | 15 |
| Organization of the Study..... | 16 |
| Chapter Two | |
| Review of Literature..... | 17 |
| Introduction..... | 17 |
| Households At Risk of Food Insecurity..... | 17 |
| Federal Nutrition Assistance Resources..... | 20 |
| Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)..... | 22 |
| National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program..... | 23 |
| Community Eligibility Provision..... | 25 |
| Academic Benefits of Access to Free School Meals..... | 27 |
| Barriers to Participation in School-Based Federal Nutrition Assistance Programs..... | 30 |
| Nutrition Assistance Resource Programs..... | 31 |
| California’s Universal Meals Program..... | 31 |
| New York City’s Lunch 4 Learning..... | 32 |
| Second Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Tennessee..... | 33 |

| | |
|--|----|
| Factors Impacting Student and Family Needs | 34 |
| Families Experiencing Poverty | 35 |
| Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)..... | 36 |
| COVID-19 Pandemic..... | 37 |
| Federal Legislation Related to Nutrition During the COVID-19 Pandemic..... | 39 |
| Summary | 41 |

Chapter Three

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| Research Methodology | 42 |
| Theoretical Approach..... | 42 |
| Research Design..... | 43 |
| Research Question | 44 |
| Sample Selection..... | 45 |
| Qualitative Study Analysis | 46 |
| Validity and Reliability..... | 47 |
| Ethical Considerations | 48 |
| Summary | 49 |

Chapter Four

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Data Collection and Analysis..... | 51 |
| Meal Participation Rates | 53 |
| Participant Profiles..... | 55 |
| Results..... | 61 |
| Stress | 64 |
| Finances | 68 |
| Time | 73 |
| Planning | 75 |
| Changes in Their Children | 76 |
| Nutrition..... | 79 |
| Quality..... | 79 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Variety..... | 80 |
| Portion..... | 81 |
| Equity..... | 81 |
| Beneficial | 82 |
| Necessary | 83 |
| Accessible | 85 |
| Awareness..... | 89 |
| Overall Impression..... | 90 |
| Chapter Summary | 92 |
| Chapter Five | |
| Findings, Recommendations, and Conclusions | 93 |
| Discussion of Findings..... | 94 |
| Limitations | 97 |
| Recommendations for Future Practice..... | 98 |
| Feasibility..... | 98 |
| Fees | 99 |
| Recommendations for Further Study | 99 |
| Conclusion | 100 |
| References..... | 101 |
| Appendix A..... | 110 |
| Appendix B..... | 111 |
| Appendix C..... | 113 |
| Appendix D..... | 114 |
| Appendix E..... | 115 |
| VITA..... | 116 |

List of Tables

Table 1

| | |
|---|----|
| K-6 Meal Participation Rates for the 2018-2019 School Year through December 2022 .. | 53 |
|---|----|

Table 2
K-6 Meal Participation Rates by Free, Reduced, and Paid Status.....54

Table 3
Participant Profiles55

Table 4
Major and Minor Themes62

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In March 2020, schools across the United States and the world scrambled to make the switch from in-person learning to virtual learning due to the spread of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). By April 2020, 150 countries worldwide had closed their schools to in-person learning in response to COVID-19 (UNICEF, 2021). The switch to virtual learning impacted more than access to academics; students attend school for their health, safety, and well-being, including access to nutritional meals. UNICEF (2021) noted that those most adversely affected were the most vulnerable student populations, those living in poverty, and those living in unsafe environments.

In response to the nationwide closures of schools and businesses, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act was passed in March 2020 (USDA, n.d.). The Families First Coronavirus Response Act provided many key provisions for addressing emergency efforts domestically and globally (Moss et al., 2020). The domestic provisions included changes to sick leave policies, COVID-19 testing, unemployment benefits, and nutrition assistance (Moss et al., 2020). The provision for nutrition assistance included increased funds for families participating in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), additional funding for families participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and two specific acts that addressed nutrition waivers for all schools (Moss et al., 2020).

The school nutrition waiver acts were the Maintaining Essential Access to Lunch for Students (MEALS) Act and the COVID-19 Child Nutrition Response Act (Moss et al., 2020). These two waivers provided increased federal funds for school meals and meal supplements

offered through school breakfast and lunch programs. They waived the meal reimbursement requirement for all students regardless of socioeconomic status (Moss et al., 2020). The Maintaining Essential Access to Lunch for Students (MEALS) Act and the COVID-19 Child Nutrition Response Act removed the need for schools to charge students for meals. In past years, meal reimbursement was only available to schools for meals purchased by students with a free or reduced meal status (USDA, n.d.). This change made free school breakfast and lunch available to all students nationwide until the waiver expired on June 30, 2022 (USDA, n.d.).

Food insecurity is a significant barrier to academic success for many students in Northeast Tennessee (Second Harvest Food Bank, 2021). It is essential to understand the prevalence of food insecurity and childhood poverty and take steps to counteract its impact within schools to see students reach their full academic potential (Kleinman et al., 2002). With increased awareness of school administrators, teachers, and staff, at-risk students are more quickly identified and linked to available service providers. The nutrition assistance provisions offered through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act enabled schools to directly address food insecurity through free meals for all students. Understanding the experiences of families during free breakfast and lunch access for all students will benefit the school system and the general public by providing insight into the economic and emotional needs of families.

Statement of the Problem

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, aside from special programming, free school meals were only available to students of families making at or below 130% of the federal poverty guidelines, and reduced meals were available to students of families making at or below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines (USDA, 2022). However, beginning in the spring of 2020 and

continuing through the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, breakfast and lunch were free for all students regardless of family income.

Due to the expiration of federal legislation, beginning with the 2022-2023 school year, students no longer had access to the free universal meals that had been available for the previous two years. School cafeterias returned to eligibility-based guidelines to determine students' free, reduced, and paid status (USDA, 2022).

There is limited research on the effect universal access to free breakfast and lunch had on families and schools during COVID-19 (Cohen et al., 2022; Landry & Simmons, 2022).

Likewise, it is unclear what is gained by providing access to this opportunity to students in school years not impacted by a global pandemic. The initial widespread access and now change in eligibility provide a unique opportunity to listen to families' experiences as they navigated the termination of access to free school meals. In addition, a review of district-wide data will give insight into how access affected meal participation for all subgroups.

Statement of the Purpose

This qualitative study will gather and analyze the experiences of families affected by the universal free meals offered through the MEALS Act and the COVID-19 Child Nutrition Response Act.

Research Question

1. What were the experiences of families with access to universal free school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic whose income otherwise restricts access?
 - What were the experiences of families concerning access to universal meals and resources (e.g., financial budget, time allocated toward breakfast and lunch preparation)?

- What were the perceptions of families concerning quality of life with access to universal meals?
 - What were the perceived anxiety levels of families during and after participation in the universal free school meals program?
 - What was the perceived overall stress level of families throughout participation in the universal free school meals program?
- What thoughts do parents and guardians have regarding the program implementation?
- What overall impressions do parents and guardians have of receiving free school meals during COVID-19?

Significance of the Study

Offering free breakfast and lunch to all students has alleviated some of the economic strain experienced by families during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kinsey et al., 2020). Many families need assistance but do not qualify for free and reduced meals due to incomes exceeding the eligibility requirements (Gunderson et al., 2011; Kinsey et al., 2020). Universal free school meals allow all students to eat regardless of socioeconomic status resulting in increased school meal participation rates (Gordanier et al., 2020; Ruffini, 2022). Deeper understanding will inform practice around meal benefits and give direction to districts and states as they structure supports for families and students.

Definition of Terms

The following terms used throughout the study are defined as follows:

COVID-19 pandemic: caused by an infectious disease named Coronavirus disease that impacted the entire world (World Health Organization, 2022).

Families First Coronavirus Response Act: Public Law 116–127 was first established on March 18, 2020, and subsequently extended. “Making emergency supplemental appropriations for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2020, and for other purposes” (United States Department of Agriculture, 2020, p. 1).

Food insecurity: “the inability to provide food for at least one household member because of lack of resources at some time in the past year” (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.).

Free and reduced meals: low or no-cost breakfasts and lunches are available for students coming from homes with lower socioeconomic statuses and attending public and non-profit private schools (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017).

Universal free meals: the opportunity for all students to eat breakfast and lunch at school for free, regardless of socioeconomic status.

Organization of the Study

For the previous two years, free school meals have been available to all students due to the economic impact of COVID-19. Federal legislation developed to address the economic strain experienced by families across the nation provided the funding for universal meal access. The MEALS Act and the COVID-19 Child Nutrition Response Act expired on June 30, 2022, returning meal reimbursement to pre-pandemic procedures focused solely on free and reduced meal purchases. Chapter 2 reviews the impact of poverty and food insecurity on families, the economic and emotional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the available federal resources provided to alleviate those burdens. Chapter 3 contains the research methodology, including the theoretical approach and the research design. Chapter 4 and 5 provide an overview of the data collection, analysis and discussion of findings, recommendations, and conclusions.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

Introduction

Food insecurity is one of the most critical nutrition-related public health issues in the United States and is a growing trend, particularly for households with children (Fiese et al., 2011; Gunderson et al., 2014). Households are food insecure if they lack consistent access to food (Gregory & Coleman-Jensen, 2013). In contrast, Gregory and Coleman-Jensen (2013) described food-secure households as those that can ensure active and healthy lifestyles due to having access to enough food for all members at all times. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), food insecurity is defined as “the inability to provide food for at least one household member because of lack of resources at some time in the past year” (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], n.d.).

Households At Risk of Food Insecurity

Research indicates that low-income households with children, especially female-headed homes, are at a greater risk for food insecurity than low-income households without children (Fiese et al., 2011). This finding is especially problematic as low-income households often have more children, increasing the risk of food insecurity during critical phases of child development (Anderson et al., 2016). An increased number of children in the home lessens a family’s labor supply while increasing household food needs (Ratcliffe, 2011). According to Hecht et al. (2020), “one in 7 US children lives in a food-insecure household” (p. 1405), and across the United States, 16.5% of families experienced food insecurity in 2016 (Turner et al., 2019).

Instability within the home caused by disruptions to the family unit and food insecurity can negatively affect child development (Fiese et al., 2011). Experiencing food insecurity during critical fetal and childhood development periods can have long-term effects on children’s health,

economic well-being, and future opportunities (Anderson et al., 2016). According to Bernard et al. (2018), according to parent reports, food-insecure children are more likely to experience frequent headaches and stomachaches, are at higher risk of asthma and obesity, and experience more peer, emotional, and conduct problems than food-secure children. Likewise, the household food security status impacts caregivers' mental and physical health (Anderson et al., 2016). Adults from food-insecure households are more likely to experience increased hypertension and hyperlipidemia and are more prone to suicidal ideation than those from food-secure homes (Bernard et al., 2018).

Kotchick et al. (2021) studied the relationship between food insecurity and caregivers' mental health. The researchers found that stress from poverty and economic hardship increases the psychological distress experienced by caregivers and impacts the parenting approach (Kotchick et al., 2021). According to Kotchick et al. (2021), "it is speculated that household food insecurity is a chronic source of stress" for caregivers (p. 98). The stress created by food insecurity can influence the caregiver's food-related behaviors concerning what and how children are fed (Berge et al., 2020).

Increased levels of stress and anxiety from food insecurity can negatively affect parenting and, in turn, children's behavior (Gee & Asim, n.d.). According to Gee and Asim (n.d.), struggling to provide food can lead to feelings of inadequacy, resulting in increased stress, anxiety, and depression. Likewise, families who once were food secure and are now food insecure experience higher levels of caregiver distress (Gee & Asim, n.d.). Perez-Escamilla and Pinheiro de Toledo Vianna (2012) refer to household food insecurity as "a powerful stressor that is likely to have a direct and indirect impact on the psycho-emotional, social, behavioral, and intellectual development of children" (p.13).

In addition to children's health and well-being, researchers found that children's behavioral and mental health outcomes are also impacted by food insecurity (Slack & Yoon, 2005). Slack and Yoon (2005) found a positive correlation between children experiencing food hardship and exhibiting behavior problems. These behavior problems continued to exist despite the researchers "controlling for parental stress, warmth, and depression" throughout the study (Slack & Yoon, 2005, p. 511). Young children experiencing both food insecurity and behavior problems often exhibited internalizing behaviors, while older children experiencing both food insecurity and behavior problems demonstrated externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Slack & Yoon, 2005).

The researchers found that the longer the period of exposure to food insecurity, the greater the behavior problems exhibited by children (Slack & Yoon, 2005). According to Slack and Yoon (2005), children experiencing food insecurity can display "poor play behaviors, poor preschool achievement, and poor scores on developmental indices" (p. 513). In addition, interventions used by schools to address behavior problems do not include resources to counteract the impact of food insecurity (Slack & Yoon, 2005).

Children living in households headed by African American, Hispanic, single or divorced persons, individuals who rent, young people, and less educated persons are more likely to experience food insecurity than their counterparts (Gunderson et al., 2011; Gregory & Coleman-Jensen, 2013). In addition, living in a southern state or having children in the home, especially children under the age of six, increases the likelihood of experiencing food insecurity (Bernard et al., 2018). This information is intended to indicate the correlation between these characteristics rather than causation. An individual's sex, race, age, geographic location, and education can determine the likelihood of lower earned wages, resulting in a higher risk of food insecurity

(Ratcliffe et al., 2011). Low household income is a determinant of food insecurity (Bernard et al., 2018).

Gunderson et al. (2011) identified access to resources as a large deterrent of food insecurity. As household income declines, reported food insecurity also decreases due to access to federal resources such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the USDA's National School Lunch Program (Gunderson et al., 2011; Mykerezzi & Mills, 2010; Ratcliffe et al., 2011). Mykerezzi and Mills (2010) note that cutting access to benefits even slightly would increase the family's food insecurity status. According to Gunderson et al. (2011), millions of food-insecure and marginally food-insecure households do not qualify for benefits due to incomes just above the qualification requirements. This disqualification leaves families at greater risk of food insecurity than households with lower incomes eligible for federal assistance programs.

Families categorized as marginally food insecure often experience food anxiety as the first indicator of food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen, 2010). Coleman-Jensen (2010) defines food anxiety as the "concern for adequate food supply" and notes that the condition most impacts women. In response to food anxiety, women often decrease their overall food consumption and the quality of what they eat to help compensate for the lessened access to food for their households (Coleman-Jensen, 2010). Gundersen & Ziliak (2014) note that a mother's physical and mental health directly impacts her children's food security status.

Federal Nutrition Assistance Resources

The United States Federal Government has used legislation to alleviate the impact of food insecurity and poverty on families since the Great Depression (Landers, 2007). The first government food stamp program was established in 1939 following the passing of the

Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Landers, 2007). The legislation created the first food stamp program, allowing citizens in need to purchase the surplus goods of farmers through the use of orange and blue food stamps (Landers, 2007). In addition to food stamps for citizens, the USDA also distributed surplus farm goods to school lunch programs during this time (Ralston et al., 2008). According to Landers (2007), access to surplus goods was mutually beneficial for the farmers and citizens.

The food stamp program lasted for four years and was discontinued due to the economic impact of World War II (Landers, 2007). When asked to comment on the program's effectiveness, the first food stamp program administrator, Milo Perkins, said, “we got a picture of a gorge, with farm surpluses on one cliff and undernourished city folks with outstretched hands on the other. We set out to find a practical way to build a bridge across that chasm” (Landers, 2007, p. 1946).

During this time, the federal government began to consider implementing permanent federal support at the school level (Ralston et al., 2008). According to Ralston et al. (2008), States and localities had provided meals to school children on their own for years before the support received during the food stamp program of 1939-1943. In 1946, to address food insecurity at the school level, the USDA established the National School Lunch Program, signed by President Harry Truman (USDA, n.d.). According to the USDA (2019), 7.1 million children participated in the program that first year. By 2016, 30.4 million children participated in the National School Lunch Program annually (USDA, 2019).

Over the 21 years following the discontinuation of the first food stamp program, the program's effectiveness continued to be studied, and several legislative proposals were introduced to create a permanent federal food stamp program (Landers, 2007). In 1964, the Food

Stamp Act was established as a permanent federal program under President Lyndon B. Johnson and would eventually become known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (Landers, 2007). Currently, 42 million people in the United States receive SNAP benefits (Hunger & Health, 2022).

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

The mission of SNAP is “Ending Hunger and Moving People Toward Self-Sufficiency” (USDA, n.d.). SNAP is a federal program that provides benefits to low-income families and individuals to purchase food (USDA, n.d.). Eligibility is determined based on the family or individual’s income compared to the national poverty level (USDA, n.d.). Individuals can apply for benefits through local USDA Food and Nutrition Service offices (USDA, n.d.). Based on current data, a family of four could receive a maximum of \$835 per month in food stamps (USDA, n.d.).

According to the USDA (n.d.), 30 % of a SNAP family’s income is expected to be used for food, creating the formula for determining benefits eligibility. SNAP benefits are the same across the country and are not indexed to consider the difference in food cost by region (Gregory & Coleman-Jensen, 2013). Gregory and Coleman-Jensen (2013) suggest SNAP benefits could be more effective in reducing food insecurity if indexed to match local and regional food supply prices and if attention to more factors impacting families was considered when determining benefits eligibility.

Feeding America is the largest charity in the United States dedicated to ending hunger (Feeding America, 2023). The charity studies food insecurity at the county level through *Map the Meal Gap* to further break down the specific needs of regions rather than only utilizing statewide data (Gunderson et al., 2014). Access to resources, cost of living, and salaries vary by locality

and region and are helpful factors in further understanding food insecurity (Gunderson et al., 2014).

National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program

The National School Lunch Program is the second-largest anti-hunger program in the nation behind the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (Kinsey et al., 2020). The National School Lunch Program provides meal reimbursement to schools for all purchased meals by children identified as qualifying for free and reduced lunch (USDA, n.d.). The program is available to public schools, private non-profit schools, and daycare facilities (USDA, n.d.). Like SNAP, eligibility for free and reduced lunches is determined by the family's income or status as a homeless, migrant, or foster child (USDA, 2017). Free school meals reduce food insecurity for families (Kinsey et al., 2020). According to Kinsey et al. (2020), before March 2020, the National School Lunch Program was responsible for reducing the impact of poverty on 1.3 million people.

In addition to the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program was introduced as a pilot program in 1966 (USDA, 2017). In 1975, Congress added the program as a permanent federal entitlement program (USDA, 2017). According to the USDA (2017), participation in the School Breakfast Program is much smaller than in the National School Lunch Program. In 1970, it was reported that .5 million children participated in the program; by 2016, 14.57 million children were participating annually (USDA, 2017). The program utilizes the same eligibility criteria as the National School Lunch Program and provides reimbursement to school districts for meals purchased by students with a free or reduced meal status (USDA, 2017).

A third program offered through the USDA to address food insecurity in children is the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) which operates under the umbrella of the National

School Lunch Program (USDA, n.d.). The SFSP provides meals to children living in low-income communities during summer (USDA, n.d.). The mission of SFSP is “ensuring children have access to nutritious meals and snacks when school is not in session” (USDA, n.d.). SFSP operates through partnerships with state agencies, sponsors, and distribution sites to provide meals to families (USDA, n.d.).

While each of these programs successfully addresses the needs of millions of children throughout the nation, there is a large subset of families considered between food-insecure and marginally food-insecure whose income level falls just above the eligibility criteria needed for assistance (Gunderson et al., 2011; Kinsey et al., 2020). Estimates suggest as many as 10% of food-insecure and 15% of marginally food-insecure households earn incomes above the eligibility threshold to qualify for free or reduced school meals despite experiencing a need due to economic vulnerability (Bartfeld & Dunifon, 2006; Kinsey et al., 2020). In 2012, 27% of food-insecure households had incomes too high to be eligible for federal nutrition assistance programs (Weinfield, 2014). While these families are not categorized as living in poverty, they are still considered economically vulnerable, at risk of food insecurity, and not eligible for government assistance (Bartfeld & Dunifon, 2006). These families are particularly at risk of experiencing nutritional deficits caused by food insecurity due to the lack of critical supplemental support necessary to address the family’s needs (Gunderson et al., 2011; Kinsey et al., 2020; Kotchick et al., 2021).

Turner et al. (2019) found that similar to families who are ineligible for free school meals, students who are eligible for reduced-priced meals only would be more likely to eat lunch at school if they received the meal for free. Again, this reinforces the need for federal nutrition assistance programs to consider higher income levels than the current eligibility guidelines

suggest. Often reduced meal prices are still difficult to afford with the rising food costs (Turner et al., 2019). Offering universal free meals to students could increase participation in school meal programs and address nutritional deficits children are experiencing while at school (Turner et al., 2019).

Community Eligibility Provision

One solution for addressing the nutritional needs of students of families with incomes above the threshold for government assistance is the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) under the National School Lunch Program. The CEP aims to increase student meal participation (Hecht et al., 2020). The CEP is an option for schools and districts in low-income areas to provide free breakfast and lunch for all students regardless of socioeconomic status (USDA, n.d.). Despite program availability starting in 2014, only two-thirds of eligible schools participated in CEP as of 2019-2020 (Hecht et al., 2022).

Under the CEP, free and reduced meal applications are not collected. Instead, the school district's eligibility is based on a formula considering the percentage of families participating in SNAP and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), known as the identified student percentage or ISP (Hecht et al., 2020; USDA, n.d.). Schools or districts with an ISP of 40% or higher are eligible for participation in CEP (USDA, n.d.). By utilizing a school or school district's ISP, CEP avoids requiring applications and attempts to eliminate some barriers to meal participation experienced by families and schools (Hecht et al., 2020).

The impact of CEP participation on low-income communities between 2011-2016 was studied by Andreyeva and Sun (2021). Participants included children who were kindergartners in 2010-2011, parents, teachers, and administrators (Andreyeva & Sun, 2021). Children from 41 states were included in the study (Andreyeva & Sun, 2021). The researchers found that schools

participating in CEP saw increased school meal participation, a modest increase in student attendance, improved academic achievement, and decreased out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (Andreyeva & Sun, 2021).

Likewise, Turner et al. (2019) noted that California schools participating in the CEP saw significant increases in overall student participation in school meal programs. According to Gordanier et al. (2020), students of families who no longer qualify for free meals and do not receive federal nutrition assistance benefit most from access to free meals through CEP in schools. In addition, families with incomes just above the eligibility threshold for federal nutrition assistance and who do not have access to free or reduced meals will likely benefit from the school or district's participation in CEP (Gordanier et al., 2020; Ruffini, 2022). Gordanier et al. (2020) and Ruffini (2022) indicated that many income-eligible families without appropriately certified free and reduced meal applications are ineligible for free school meals. However, with access to CEP, those families would have free meals for their students regardless of application status (Gordanier et al., 2020; Ruffini, 2022).

School nutrition plays a vital role in the health and well-being of all students (Kinsey et al., 2020). Missed meals increase the risk to students' health, nutrition, and security (Kinsey et al., 2020). Ensuring access to free and reduced meals for families who need them is of utmost importance (Kinsey et al., 2020). Not all families in need of assistance will qualify under the current eligibility guidelines, especially considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families' economic situations (Bartfeld & Dunifon, 2006; Fang et al., 2021). Access to free school meals for all students can benefit families and school districts by alleviating the economic burden on families created by food insecurity and removing the administrative barriers for school districts.

Academic Benefits of Access to Free School Meals

The full impact of universal free meals on students and families remains to be seen. Schwartz and Rothbart (2020) indicate that as additional research is published, there may be differences between the free school breakfast programs and free school lunch programs on participation, attendance, and academic outcomes. These differences could be attributed to the time of day the meal is offered, alternative options from home, and differing breakfast and lunch caloric requirements (Schwartz & Rothbart, 2020).

In 2021, researchers published a comprehensive review of 47 international studies on universal free school meals (Cohen et al.). Cohen et al. (2021) suggested that differences in findings related to attendance and academic performance could be attributed to differences between breakfast and lunch programs, specifically lower participation rates in school breakfasts. Likewise, the impact of access to free school meals on attendance is significantly more after two years, and studies often consider a shorter time period of one school year or less (Cohen et al., 2021). Additional research is needed to consider the differences between the impact of access to each program, free school breakfast programs, free school lunch programs, and universal free meal programs, to understand the needs of students and how best to serve them.

Bartfeld et al. (2019) found that access to free school breakfasts can positively impact students' academic outcomes and attendance. According to Bartfeld et al.'s (2019) study of elementary school students in Wisconsin, access to the school breakfast program modestly increased attendance, test scores, and reading scores for students with a free and reduced eligibility status. Likewise, each academic area showed a modest increase for all participants, including students from higher-income families who were eligible to participate in the program because it was universally free (Bartfeld et al., 2019).

Schwartz and Rothbart (2020) studied the impact of universal free meals on middle school students in New York City Public Schools. The study considered free school breakfasts and free lunches (Schwartz & Rothbart, 2020). Schwartz and Rothbart (2020) found that by offering universal free meals, schools saw increased participation in school meals and improved student performance in English Language Arts and math exams across all students. The most significant increase in improvement was in students who were ineligible for free and reduced meals due to family income (Schwartz & Rothbart, 2020).

During the 2007-2008 school year, universal free breakfasts were made available to select Guilford County Schools in North Carolina with the highest percentages of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Ribar & Haldeman, 2013). Throughout the school year, the Guilford County School district found increased participation in school breakfasts and lunches district-wide (Ribar & Haldeman, 2013). According to Ribar and Haldeman (2013), budget constraints the following school year led to the removal of the universal free breakfast program in many schools, returning the schools to eligibility-based programs.

Following the universal free breakfast program's removal, the researchers reviewed participation rates and the impact on attendance and test scores between the two school years (Ribar & Haldeman, 2013). Ribar and Haldeman (2013) found that student participation in school meals decreased substantially when access to free meals was removed. This decrease impacted not only students who were ineligible for free meals due to income but also students who were identified as free and reduced due to the stigma associated with participating in free meals at school (Ribar & Haldeman, 2013). The researchers did not find a strong correlation between access to free meals and students' attendance or test scores (Ribar & Haldeman, 2013).

According to Cohen et al. (2021), universal free school meals benefit food-insecure students and students just above the eligibility criteria for free meals through improved food security and diet quality. Offering universal free meals benefits students by reducing stigma, removing barriers created by mandatory applications and paperwork, and creating access for families experiencing food insecurity despite living above the federal poverty level threshold (Cohen et al., 2021). In addition, access to free school meals positively correlates with academic performance and reduces behavior incidents and suspensions for all students (Cohen et al., 2021).

In 2021, Landry and Simmons surveyed 233 Arkansas food service directors, managers, and administrators regarding the benefits of expanding access to universal free meals following the expiration of federal legislation providing free school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic. More than half of the respondents indicated that unpaid meal debt was a concern for their district and that the eligibility paperwork for free and reduced meals could be reduced through access to universal free meals (Landry & Simmons, 2022). Finally, 69.5% reported that free meals should be available to all students regardless of income eligibility (Landry & Simmons, 2022).

In a similar study, the anti-hunger organization Full Plates Full Potential surveyed food service authorities in all public and charter schools in Maine (Cohen et al., 2022). In total, 43 food service professionals responded (Cohen et al., 2022). The survey included questions about COVID-19, barriers to implementation, and resources needed to continue universal school meals following the expiration of federal legislation (Cohen et al., 2022). Like Landry and Simmons (2022), the research showed that food service professionals in Maine experienced increased school meal participation, more accessible application collection, and significantly decreased

student debt (Cohen et al., 2022). In addition, respondents reported decreased stigma for students participating in free meals (Cohen et al., 2022).

The survey included challenges experienced by schools, and respondents noted financial concerns, with only 58% reporting “breaking even financially” on meals provided during COVID-19 (Cohen et al., 2022, Discussion). According to Cohen et al. (2022), financial concerns for school districts were a nationwide trend, with only 71% of food service authorities reporting “breaking even financially” on a USDA survey administered in 2022 (Discussion). In response to the financial concerns noted by school districts nationwide, Congress passed the Keep Kids Fed Act in June 2022, raising the federal reimbursement rate on breakfasts and lunches (Cohen et al., 2022).

Barriers to Participation in School-Based Federal Nutrition Assistance Programs

There are several perceived barriers to school meal participation in the School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program for students eligible for free and reduced meals. First, social stigma and peers' behaviors can impact a student’s decision to participate in school meals (Turner et al., 2019). Offering universal free meals to all students lessens the perceived stigma of eating school meals (Turner et al., 2019). Additionally, student preferences, parent perceptions, and beliefs can impact participation in school meals (Turner et al., 2019). Finally, Turner et al. (2019) noted the time of day school meals are served as a barrier to participation. Specifically, the School Breakfast Program is impacted by the timing of when it is available and the time that buses arrive at schools with students.

Likewise, there are many barriers to meal participation through the Community Eligibility Provision, including the stigma associated with receiving free meals and the administrative paperwork required to determine eligibility (Hecht et al., 2020). In non-

participating CEP schools, families who are not directly certified through participation in other federal assistance programs are required to submit free and reduced meal applications to confirm eligibility. Those applications need to be reviewed and certified by school districts (Hecht et al., 2020; Ruffini, 2022). Participation in CEP removes the administrative steps for school districts (Hecht et al., 2020).

Through CEP, all students are eligible for free meals. Still, school districts are only reimbursed based on the percentage of meals purchased by students whose families receive SNAP or TANF benefits, leaving the school district to cover the cost of any meals purchased by non-eligible students (USDA, n.d.). At times, the percentage of non-eligible students receiving this benefit can create a perceived financial barrier for schools hoping to implement this program (USDA, n.d.). Current legislation before the U.S. Congress could make participation more difficult for schools by decreasing the federal reimbursement rate and increasing the financial responsibility for school districts (Hecht et al., 2020).

Nutrition Assistance Resource Programs

California's Universal Meals Program

On July 9, 2021, California's Governor Gavin Newsom approved Assembly Bill 130, "Education finance: education omnibus budget trailer bill," establishing the California Universal Meals Program (California Department of Education [CDE], 2023; California Legislative Information, 2021). The California Universal Meals Program will provide free breakfast and lunch to all students in public and charter schools regardless of socioeconomic status beginning in the 2022-2023 school year (CDE, 2023). The program will be funded first through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) for all eligible schools and second through supplemental funding provided by the California Department of Education (CDE, 2023).

Noted in Assembly Bill 130 is that the California Universal Meals Program is not intended to replace federal school nutrition programs but to supplement available funds to reach all California students (CDE, 2023). High-poverty schools with an individual student percentage (ISP) of at least 40% will continue to be served through the CEP (CDE, 2023). All schools will still be required to follow federal regulations and guidelines to ensure free and reduced meal reimbursement is received from the federal government (CDE, 2023). With the creation of this program, California is the first state to provide universal free meals to all students regardless of socioeconomic status or federal nutrition assistance eligibility (CDE, 2023).

New York City's Lunch 4 Learning

In 2014, New York City's Lunch 4 Learning Campaign was launched by a diverse group of over 120 community partners and the New York City Community Food Advocates organization (Lunch 4 Learning, 2017). Established in 1960, the Community Food Advocates organization describes itself as a "policy impact organization" (Community Food Advocates, 2022). It is committed to ensuring all New Yorkers have access to healthy food, with the ultimate goal of ending poverty and hunger in New York City (Community Food Advocates, 2022). After three years of campaigning, Lunch 4 Learning was fully funded and officially established, and 1.1 million New York City public school students gained access to free school meals (Lunch 4 Learning, 2017).

The Lunch 4 Learning program was created to address the vast number of eligible students who were not participating in school meal programs (Lunch 4 Learning, 2017). Community Food Advocates found that out of the 780,000 students eligible for free meals, only 250,000 were participating in school meals each year (Lunch 4 Learning, 2017). Students cited "poverty stigma" as the main deterrent to school meal participation (Lunch 4 Learning, 2017).

When the campaign was initially launched in 2014, 75% of New York City public school students qualified for free or reduced meals based on family income (Lunch 4 Learning, 2017). Community Food Advocates found a 10-20% increase in meal participation among elementary through high school students due to access to universal free school lunches (Lunch 4 Learning, 2017).

Second Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Tennessee

In addition to SNAP, CEP, and the National School Lunch Program, residents in Northeast Tennessee also have access to Second Harvest Food Bank resources. The Second Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Tennessee serves the community through the Food For Kids Backpack Program, the Mobile Food Pantry, the Mobile Food Bank, and the Summer Food Service Program (Second Harvest Food Bank [SHFB], 2022). The non-profit organization partners with 140 local agencies to address hunger experienced by families in Northeast Tennessee (SHFB, 2022).

The Second Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Tennessee reported a significant increase in people seeking food assistance during 2021. The organization reported giving away 16.6 million pounds of food, feeding an average of more than 45,000 people each month, an increase from 40,000 people fed monthly in previous years (SHFB, 2022). Of that 16.6 million pounds of food, the organization delivered over 1.3 million pounds to individuals through the Mobile Food Pantry service (SHFB, 2022). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Second Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Tennessee (2022) reported the number of families experiencing food insecurity to have risen by more than 30%.

According to the Second Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Tennessee (2022), more than one in four children in the eight-county region currently live in poverty; this is a higher rate than

the state of Tennessee as a whole. The eight-county region of Northeast Tennessee includes Carter, Greene, Hancock, Hawkins, Johnson, Sullivan, Washington, and Unicoi Counties. Of the twenty most impoverished counties in the state, Hancock ranks second, Johnson ranks eleventh, and Greene ranks sixteenth (SHFB, 2022). The impact of food insecurity on the children of Northeast Tennessee is significant (SHFB, 2022).

According to the Tennessee Department of Education (2022), for the 2021-22 academic year, 30% of Tennessee students were considered economically disadvantaged, making them eligible for free or reduced meals in the cafeteria due to their household income and status as food insecure. Of those students considered economically disadvantaged, 1% of students identified as homeless, and less than 1% of students were living in foster care (Tennessee Department of Education, 2022). According to Feeding America's 2021 Map the Meal Gap, "15.9% of all Northeast Tennesseans (81,010 individuals) are considered food insecure, and 18.8% of children in Northeast Tennessee (18,430 individuals under age 18) are considered food insecure" (SHFB, 2022).

Factors Impacting Student and Family Needs

In 2014, Feeding America released the *Hunger in America 2014 National Report*. The *Hunger in America* report is the most comprehensive study of hunger conducted, and historically it has been released every four years since 1993 (Weinfield et al., 2014). The 2014 study was the most recent study completed and contains data from 2012 to 2013. Over 60,000 individuals completed the client survey, most conducted in English (Weinfield et al., 2014). According to the researchers, Weinfield et al. (2014), poverty, unemployment, and low incomes lead to food insecurity.

Families Experiencing Poverty

According to Weinfield et al. (2014), clients of Feeding America often make difficult decisions when paying for food, housing, or other necessities. Client households reported having to choose between “paying for food and paying for medical care (65.9%), utilities (69.3%), housing (57.1%), or transportation (66.5%) at some point in the past 12 months” (Weinfield et al., 2014, p. 134). Many families face these difficult decisions every month (Weinfield et al., 2014).

In addition to making difficult decisions regarding paying for food or necessities, clients of Feeding America also reported multiple coping strategies utilized to stretch food for their families (Weinfield et al., 2014). Some of the reported coping skills included “eating food past the expiration date (56.1%) and watering down food or drink (40.0%)” (Weinfield et al., 2014, p. 150). Weinfield et al. (2014) noted additional coping skills, including growing their food (22.7%), pawning or selling personal property (34.9%), purchasing less expensive, unhealthy food (83.5%), and receiving help from friends or family (51.0%). Additionally, 54.8% of these households reported using three or more methods in the past 12 months (Weinfield et al., 2014). The caregivers' difficult decisions acknowledged in Feeding America's report add to the stress already experienced due to poverty and food insecurity (Weinfield et al., 2014).

Students living in poverty and experiencing food insecurity are considered at risk socially, emotionally, and academically (Kleinman et al., 2002). At-risk students have a more challenging time focusing on classes and assignments, have lower math scores, are more likely to have to repeat a grade, are frequently tardy or absent, and are ultimately less likely than their peers to graduate from high school (Kleinman et al., 2002.; National Education Association, 2015; Taras, 2005). According to the National Education Association (2015), poverty and food

insecurity can negatively impact their development, achievement, and behavior. These concerns come when schools are held to the highest academic achievement standards ever (Noltemeyer et al., 2012).

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a student's physiological needs include: food, water, warmth, and rest; their safety needs include: security and safety; and their belongingness and love needs include: intimate relationships and friends (Noltemeyer et al., 2012). Each of these categories builds the base needed for a student's academic achievement. Children experiencing poverty and food insecurity enter the school system at a disadvantage compared to their peers (Kleinman et al., 2002).

Behavioral problems exhibited at school are sometimes met with disciplinary consequences that do not consider the possibility of the impact of food insecurity on the child (Slack & Yoon, 2005). According to Slack and Yoon (2005), there are differences between typical adolescent behavioral problems and behavioral problems related to food insecurity. Addressing food insecurity by utilizing appropriate food-related interventions as the first step can alleviate behavioral problems at home and school, allowing students to remain in the classroom and providing them with the best chance at academic success (Slack & Yoon, 2005).

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Educators can gain a more holistic understanding of students' needs by considering the role of adverse childhood experiences on children. Kaiser-Permanente conducted the original Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Study from 1995 to 1997 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services [HHS], 2019). It included 17,000 participants, and the results have primarily influenced the understanding of trauma and its impact on students (HHS, 2019). The study divided ACEs into three categories: abuse, neglect, and household challenges, and while poverty

was not directly listed in the survey, it has been found that poverty is highly comorbid with adverse childhood experiences (HHS, 2019).

Ultimately, many students who have experienced trauma and toxic stress also live in poverty (HHS, 2019). Suppose one in four students is experiencing food insecurity, and two out of every three students have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience; in that case, it is reasonable to conclude an increased correlation between the two (Hughes, 2018). Poverty is cyclical, and based on research into ACEs, the impacts of trauma and toxic stress can be generational, creating a complicated cycle to escape (Hughes, 2018).

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic increased anxiety, depression, suicidal behavior, and food insecurity in families nationwide (Fang et al., 2021). Necessary measures were taken to ensure the physical health of the world during the pandemic, i.e., lockdowns, quarantines, and school closures, but these measures were not without burden on families (Fang et al., 2021). While these measures were intended to protect the physical health of as many people as possible, and they did, they often hurt the mental health of many people at the same time (Fang et al., 2021). In addition, Fang et al. (2021) noted the loss of employment, financial stress, and the burden of finding childcare as reasons that mental health was negatively impacted during the pandemic. Low-income families were significantly affected by financial strain and increased food insecurity (Fang et al., 2021).

The National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program provided free meals for over 30 million children in schools across the United States in the spring of 2020 (Nagata et al., 2021). It is estimated that food insecurity in households with children tripled during the shutdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Nagata et al., 2021). In April 2020,

California's SNAP online application program saw an increase in applications for benefits that was four times higher than the usual rate (Nagata et al., 2021).

The response by school nutrition directors to the nationwide school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was swift and effective. Throughout the spring of 2020, school nutrition directors shifted procedures to account for the ever-changing safety guidelines while balancing employee safety, supply chain disruptions, and growing community food insecurity concerns (Katz, 2022). School nutrition staff were quickly classified as essential workers, expected to report to schools to ensure that children had access to meals despite the school closures (Katz, 2022). Despite the efforts of school nutrition directors and cafeteria staff, school closures made access to school meals inaccessible for many families (Kinsey et al., 2020).

Fang et al. (2021) found increased food insecurity to significantly impact caregivers' mental health more than the loss of employment during the pandemic. Food insecurity creates increased anxiety and depression, often expressed as worry (Fang et al., 2021). The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, also known as WIC, and emergency stimulus payments due to the CARES Act and the Families First Coronavirus Response Act were intended to help families navigate economic challenges during COVID-19. However, although access to these resources helped to alleviate hunger, Fang et al. (2021) did not find evidence that access to these resources decreased the feelings of anxiety and depression caregivers were experiencing.

When schools began to close across the nation in March 2020, many caregivers had to choose between work and childcare, which had significant financial implications for families (Fang et al., 2021). Fang et al. (2021) found that respondents with children experienced the highest rates of anxiety and depression in the study. In addition, those who reported experiencing

food insecurity were at increased risk for anxiety and depression if there were children in the home (Fang et al., 2021). Providing resources for families experiencing food insecurity is essential; however, resources alone will not solve the mental health anguish that comes from food insecurity (Fang et al., 2021).

Federal Legislation Related to Nutrition During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In March 2020, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act was passed to address the nutritional needs of families and students nationwide. Included in that legislation were the Maintaining Essential Access to Lunch for Students (MEALS) Act and the COVID-19 Child Nutrition Response Act (Moss et al., 2020). These two acts contained the issuance of waivers for schools to provide free breakfast and lunch for every school-aged student, regardless of socioeconomic status nationwide (Kinsey et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2020).

In a matter of weeks, school districts across the country moved from in-person to virtual learning. In response, school cafeteria staff immediately shifted to providing meals for pick up from school locations, delivery through school bus routes to neighborhoods in need, and home delivery for families who needed it (Kinsey et al., 2020). The funding for this response came from federal relief funds provided by the MEALS Act and the COVID-19 Child Nutrition Response Act (Moss et al., 2020).

Under the MEALS Act and the COVID-19 Child Nutrition Response Act, the USDA's National School Lunch Program Seamless Summer Option (SSO) was expanded to allow school and childcare institutions to serve meals to families in the format they felt best fit the needs of their students and communities (USDA, 2021). The SSO program allowed for flexibility in meal delivery, serving times, and meal locations (USDA, 2021). By 2021, the USDA estimated that 12 million children were experiencing food insecurity due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

(USDA, 2021). The flexibility of school and childcare meal service provided by the SSO program offered a lifeline for many families (USDA, 2021). While efforts were made to get meals to as many students as possible, children were still missed (Fang et al., 2021).

In addition to meals provided through schools, the Pandemic Electronic Benefits (P-EBT) program expanded benefits to reach families that were missed by school meal distribution efforts (Nagata et al., 2021). The federal government also issued a series of stimulus checks to qualifying families to aid in addressing the rising levels of unemployment that were sweeping the nation (Fang et al., 2021). While these assistance programs addressed the economic needs of families, access to benefits did not decrease the negative impact of food insecurity on caregivers' mental health (Fang et al., 2021). Fang et al. (2021) found that becoming food insecure during the COVID-19 pandemic created a higher reported prevalence of anxiety and depression than the loss of employment.

Since the Families First Coronavirus Response Act passed in March 2020, the USDA and the previous and current federal administrations were primarily responsible for the extension of the waivers that provided free breakfast and lunch for all students (USDA, n.d.). The extension of these waivers provided meal reimbursement to school districts for breakfast and lunch for all students regardless of income, removing the need for schools to charge students for meals. Before the establishment of this legislation, meal reimbursement was only available to schools for meals purchased by students with a free or reduced meal status (USDA, n.d.).

Both the MEALS Act and the COVID-19 Child Nutrition Response Act expired on June 30, 2022, returning federal meal reimbursement to what it was before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Moss et al., 2020). Beginning with the 2022-2023 school year, students who do not qualify for free and reduced meals will pay for them again (Moss et al., 2020). The widespread

loss of employment due to the pandemic will likely result in more students qualifying for free and reduced meals than ever before (Moss et al., 2020). Many families making just above the income eligibility requirement for qualification will be left without access to the free meals they received through COVID relief measures (Kinsey et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2020).

Summary

With the end of the school meal reimbursement waivers, it is more important than ever for educators to understand the impact of poverty and food insecurity on students and families. Understanding the effect of poverty on the lives of students and families provides educators with a foundation for working to disrupt the influence of poverty on the experiences students have in the classroom and the community as a whole (Budge & Parrett, 2018).

In addition to educators, state and federal legislators must recognize the deficits in the current criteria used to determine federal benefits eligibility for households. Participation in school meal programs increased most recently due to the MEALS Act and the COVID-19 Child Nutrition Response Act, and in past years through school and district participation in the CEP program (Andreyeva & Sun, 2021; Cohen et al., 2022; Landry & Simmons, 2022; Moss et al., 2020). The mission of the National School Lunch Program is “Feeding the Future with Healthy School Lunches” (USDA, n.d.). Access to free meals for all students shows positive impacts not only for students, but also for their families.

CHAPTER 3

Research Methodology

This qualitative research study aimed to better understand the experiences of families during access to universal free school meals. Significant research exists on the positive effects of federal free and reduced meal programs (Bartfeld & Dunifon, 2006; Gordanier et al., 2020; Gunderson et al., 2011; Kinsey et al., 2020; Mykerezi & Mills, 2010; Ratcliffe et al., 2011; Ruffini, 2022; Turner et al., 2019). However, the impact of access to free meals for all students through the MEALS Act and the COVID-19 Child Nutrition Response Act enacted during COVID-19 needs further examination.

Theoretical Approach

The most applicable theoretical framework to this study is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory. The psychological theory was proposed by Abraham Maslow in 1943 as a basis for reaching self-actualization (Beegle, 2007). According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, students experiencing deficiency needs, i.e., food, shelter, safety, and social and belonging needs, will have greater difficulty in reaching growth needs, specifically academic achievement (Noltemeyer et al., 2021). According to Noltemeyer et al. (2021), "although all children are expected to achieve academically regardless of whether their deficiency needs including hunger, safety, and health have been fully achieved, the lack of these basic needs may negatively affect their school performance" (p.26).

Educational research often cites the importance of "Maslow before Bloom," which is the understanding that until a student's basic needs are met, learning is more challenging (Mutch & Peung, 2021; Noltemeyer et al., 2021). Beegle (2007) noted, "energy devoted to survival can take away the hope of ever meeting esteem or self-actualizing needs" (p. 21). According to

Mutch and Peung's study (2021), teachers frequently noted the importance of utilizing a pedagogy that first focused on student needs during the school closures in March 2020 to reach students through distance learning. Likewise, throughout the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, school districts nationwide continued to meet the physiological need for access to food by offering free breakfast and lunch to all students. Continuing to focus on the physiological, safety, and love and belonging needs of students will create equitable learning environments that increase the likelihood of success for all students.

Research Design

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the basic qualitative research study is the most common type of qualitative research in education. This type of study is interpretive and utilizes interviews, observations, and document analysis; it does not have a focused dimension like the other forms of qualitative research. The authors noted that qualitative research aims to understand human experiences and how individuals interpret those experiences. They identified the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in interpretive/qualitative research. Issues that could arise during a qualitative research study are the bias and shortcomings of the researcher. Identifying and monitoring those "subjectivities" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 16) is essential to the research process.

Interpretive research is used to understand and describe what is occurring, assembling a "socially constructed reality" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interpretive research excels in its focus on understanding different realities. Rather than one single, controlled reality, interpretive research can simultaneously lead to many different interpretations, opening the door to more understanding of different perspectives.

Qualitative research often includes data collection and analysis from documents as a primary or secondary source of information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to the authors, documentary data can “advance new categories and hypotheses, offer historical understanding, track change and development, and so on” (p. 182). The authors describe documentary data as “objective,” “unobtrusive,” and “nonreactive” (p. 182-183.) Nonreactive data exists outside the research process because it is created for other purposes, such as official records or observations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A basic qualitative research design was selected to focus on the experiences of each individual and their interpretation of the meaning of that experience. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the experiences parents and students had during the two years that school meals were free for all students. Access to free meals in a school setting is commonly experienced by some students every year and was experienced by all students from March 2020 through May 2022. How families reacted to access to free meals can be categorized into shared experiences across that group. The researcher utilized interviews to gather data and reviewed district records on participation in school meals beginning with the 2018-2019 school year through December 2022.

Research Question

1. What were the experiences of families with access to universal free school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic whose income otherwise restricts access?
 - What were the experiences of families concerning access to universal meals and resources (e.g., financial budget, time allocated toward breakfast and lunch preparation)?

- What were the perceptions of families concerning quality of life with access to universal meals?
 - What were the perceived anxiety levels of families during and after participation in the universal free school meals program?
 - What was the perceived overall stress level of families throughout participation in the universal free school meals program?
- What thoughts do parents and guardians have regarding the program implementation?
- What overall impressions do parents and guardians have of receiving free school meals during COVID-19?

Sample Selection

Maximum variation sampling was used to identify subjects, allowing the results to be transferable to other school districts. The schools chosen for this study are diverse in location, poverty rate, and student demographic makeup. The schools included were elementary and middle schools. The research focused on the impact of access to free school meals on the family and schools. Families from all eight elementary and two middle schools in the district were invited to participate in the study. Interview participants represented students from both middle schools and four of the eight elementary schools in the district.

This research focused on parents and guardians of students in grades 4-8. An interview interest flyer was sent home by elementary and middle school teachers through email and Bloomz, the district's parent communication app. Parents and guardians of fourth through eighth-grade students were self-identified by responding to the interview interest flyer. The interviews were conducted based on the interest indicated in response to the flyer. Parent and guardian participants were from families that did not qualify for free meals for the 2022-2023

school year. All parents that reached out to express interest and met the eligibility criteria were included in the research study.

Qualitative Study Analysis

Information was collected through research interviews. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a research interview “is a conversation that has a structure and a purpose” (p. 107). They identified three types of interviews: Highly structured and standardized, semi-structured, and unstructured and informal. The interviews were designed as semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexibility in the order of questions asked and the opportunity for follow-up questions as needed. Demographic information was obtained in a structured format for consistency, and some informal questions were asked to build rapport. The interview questions (Appendix A) were structured to understand the impact of universal free meals on families' experiences. The interviews were video recorded through the Zoom platform.

In addition, data was collected from official district records documenting the extent to which meals were obtained by kindergarten through sixth-grade students from August 2018 through December 2022. These documents included a breakdown of the meals purchased for each school year. In addition, data was also collected to document the number of meals served to students with a free and reduced status from August 2022 through December 2022, when meals were no longer free for all students. Multiple years of data were reviewed to assess trends across all of the schools in the district. The intention was to determine the extent to which participation occurred across the schools in the district and any overall generalizability in the field of education.

Throughout the research study, interview responses were collected and organized into themes and patterns. A codebook was created to provide consistency in the themes and ensure

the secondary coder's understanding. The data received from the district regarding official student meal participation records was organized by year so it could be analyzed across the district. Notes were made on each record to indicate anomalies that could have affected the number of meals served for each school year.

In addition to analyzing the document data, each interview was transcribed to ensure accurate understanding, and information was included from each interviewee. Notes were made on each transcription, and categories were identified through coding. The identified categories were then used to make inferences about the research to determine the study's findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Validity and Reliability

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), triangulation involves comparing multiple sources collected across different settings to ensure the credibility of the research (p. 245). They note that triangulation can also involve considering multiple investigators, methods, or theories. The authors emphasized that utilizing multiple sources of data ensures that the research is not based on just the researcher's frame of reference or bias. Qualitative studies often study human behavior, and according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "human behavior is never static" (p. 250) and, therefore, cannot be replicated precisely in studies in the same way as quantitative research. Triangulation increases the credibility of the research by offering multiple data sources showing the same result rather than one method, researcher, or data set.

Triangulation was used as a specific method for cross-checking the participant interviews and document review. A secondary coder was used to ensure consistency in identifying relevant themes in the interview results. Data from schools across the district were included. The inclusion of different schools allowed for the possibility of varied responses in the data to be

collected to confirm the reliability of the findings. Including multiple data sources also ensures this is not just an experience happening at one school but one that can be generalized widely, leading to the establishment of external validity for the reader. External validity refers to how transferable the findings of a study are to other situations and is essential in the field of education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

When interviewing parents and guardians regarding their understanding of the impact of universal free meals due to COVID-19, member checking was used periodically to ensure the accurate representation of their perspectives. In addition to member checking, following the interviews, participants were asked to review the transcription of their interview to ensure their viewpoints were accurately represented. The topic of universal free meals is sensitive, and people have strong feelings surrounding it. The interview subjects needed to trust the interpretation of their views, and the writing accurately represented their experience. Professionally, accurate representation of interviewees' experiences is essential, both for the sake of credibility and ethics.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure ethical conduct and to protect the rights of all involved in the research study, the research proposal was approved and evaluated by Milligan University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). As part of the IRB review process, the researcher completed the required Human Research Protections Program. Informed consent (Appendix B) was used to inform participants of the right to remove themselves from the study at any time and to communicate the procedures established to ensure confidentiality. Participants were not allowed to continue the research study without informed consent.

In addition to completing the IRB review process at Milligan University, the researcher completed the research approval process for the school district. Included in that process was a research study proposal, submission of the interview outline, recruitment flyer, and a copy of the proposed informed consent. The research proposal gained district-wide approval from the curriculum division reviewer and the district superintendent for continuance in all elementary and middle schools. Upon receiving approval, the researcher was then allowed to begin reaching out to school principals for assistance.

In response to the interview interest flyer, participants had to provide Personal Identifying Information (PII) if they were interested in being included in interviews. The parent or guardian voluntarily provided PII which included their name, phone number, email address, and grade levels and schools of the children in their home. All PII was maintained on a password-protected computer. PII obtained through the interviews was omitted from research documents and replaced with identifying numbers and pseudonyms. Official school records documenting the number of meals served will not contain PII.

Summary

Significant research exists surrounding the benefits access to free meals in schools provides for students with a free and reduced status (Bartfeld & Dunifon, 2006; Gordanier et al., 2020; Gunderson et al., 2011; Kinsey et al., 2020; Mykerezi & Mills, 2010; Ratcliffe et al., 2011; Ruffini, 2022; Turner et al., 2019). In addition, research is available regarding barriers to participation for students and families with a free or reduced status, including required paperwork and social stigma experienced by students (Cohen et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2019). Through the use of in-depth interviews and document review, this qualitative study aimed to

gather information on how access to free meals for all students affects families and meal participation rates for schools.

CHAPTER 4

Data Collection and Analysis

To answer the research questions, eight parents of students in a public school district in the south were interviewed. To recruit participants, emails were sent to each principal at the eight elementary schools and two middle schools to request assistance in sending out the recruitment flyer. The email (Appendix C) noted the researcher's approval from the superintendent and the parameters of the study. Included in the email was a recruitment flyer (Appendix D) detailing the parameters for the study. Principals were asked to share the email and flyer with fourth through eighth-grade teachers to send out to parents and guardians through email or Bloomz.

The parameters for the study included parents of fourth through eighth-grade students. Fourth grade was chosen as a parameter because current fourth-grade students were the lowest grade level to have completed a full school year before being disrupted by COVID-19 in March 2020. Their parents and caregivers experienced paying for school meals for a full year before COVID-19. The parameter of eighth-grade students was chosen because this particular school district instituted a hybrid schedule for students during the 2020-2021 school year for grades 7-12. Current eighth-grade students were not impacted by this hybrid schedule and would have had access to free school meals every day of the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years.

Participants in the study were parents of a student in fourth through eighth grade and not eligible to receive free meals during the 2022-2023 school year. Families with a reduced status were eligible to participate in the interview, as a reduced status does require the parent to pay a portion of their student's meal costs. Experiences of all school-aged children in the home were considered as long as the participant had at least one student between fourth and eighth grade.

Individual interviews were conducted to collect data from participants. A predetermined interview outline was used, and on occasion, follow-up questions were utilized based on participant responses. The interviews were conducted between December 13, 2022, and January 21, 2023.

Each participant was interviewed through the virtual meeting platform, Zoom. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and sent to the participant for review. After each participant had reviewed and approved their interview transcription, the researcher organized and categorized the data. First, each participant was assigned an interview number that was used throughout the coding process. During this process, each question response was organized, and themes were noted as they emerged. Transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure accurate understanding. A codebook was created for the secondary coder to use when reviewing the data. Finally, themes from the interview questions were labeled and used to organize the data delivery.

In addition to interview data, district-wide data regarding meal participation rates for kindergarten through sixth-grade students (K-6) from the 2018-2019 school year through December 2022 was reviewed. Data associated with two different school years reflect anomalies associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, the schools of the study were shut down for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year, creating inconsistent meal participation numbers for the final quarter of the school year.

In 2020-2021, district-wide, in-person learning did not start until August 31, three weeks later than a typical school year would start. In addition, 7-12th grade students attended school on a hybrid schedule. This altered schedule was in place for most of the school year, and attendance was determined alphabetically based on the student's last name. All students participated in asynchronous learning on Wednesdays.

Throughout the school year, some elementary schools had to change to a remote, asynchronous learning environment for weeks at a time to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the schools. Even if schools did not close, many students missed school due to mandatory quarantines and illness. The district also offered a virtual learning option for students in grades K-12 during the 2020-2021 school year. The district-wide meal participation rates of K-6 students for the 2018-2019 through December 2022 school years are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

K-6 Meal Participation Rates for the 2018-2019 School Year through December 2022

| School Year | Total Breakfast | Total Lunch | Total Meals Served | Anomaly Experienced |
|---------------------|-----------------|-------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| 2018-2019 | 235,057 | 470,006 | 705,063 | None |
| 2019-2020 | 241,321 | 432,481 | 673,802 | COVID-19 Closure |
| 2020-2021 | 258,748 | 394,708 | 653,456 | Quarantines and Virtual Learning |
| 2021-2022 | 304,625 | 508,309 | 812,934 | None |
| Aug. 2022-Dec. 2022 | 117,504 | 194,511 | 312,015 | Half the school year |
| 2022-2023 Projected | 235,008 | 389,022 | 624,030 | |

Meal Participation Rates

Due to the absence of COVID-19-related anomalies, meal participation data from the 2018-2019 school year and the 2021-2022 school year were compared. The 2021-2022 school year had the best overall participation in breakfasts and lunches. As seen in Table 1, district-wide, K-6 students participated in breakfast and lunch at school at a higher rate when meals were free for all students, and no anomalies were present to disrupt access to school meals. Meal participation rates by free, reduced, and paid status are presented in Table 2.

Table 2*K-6 Meal Participation Rates by Free, Reduced, and Paid Status*

| School Year | Free % | Reduced % | Paid % | Anomaly Experienced |
|---------------------|--------|-----------|--------|----------------------------------|
| 2018-2019 | 79.60 | 71.49 | 36.27 | None |
| 2019-2020 | 76.48 | 56.49 | 30.09 | COVID-19 Closure |
| 2020-2021 | 71.23 | 58.44 | 33.01 | Quarantines and Virtual Learning |
| 2021-2022 | 75.82 | 76.64 | 60.30 | None |
| Aug. 2022-Dec. 2022 | 69.74 | 66.79 | 32.88 | Half the school year |

Both Reduced and Paid status K-6 students district-wide participated in school meals at a higher rate during the 2021-2022 school year when meals were free for all students. As seen in Table 2, for the first half of the 2022-2023 school year, the participation rates are the lowest reported rates for the school district over the five-year period. The reported 2022-2023 data reflects a school year without any COVID-19-related anomalies that would impact student participation.

The data in Table 2 reinforces the research shared by Turner et al. (2019) that students with a reduced status are more likely to participate in school meals if meals are free for all students. Reduced meals can often be difficult to afford, and offering meals for free can remove the financial barrier to meal participation (Turner et al., 2019). In addition to removing financial barriers, offering free meals to all students eliminates barriers to access related to the stigma associated with qualifying for free and reduced meals (Turner et al., 2019). Ribar and Haldeman (2013) reported that meal participation decreases when access to universal free meals is

removed, which aligns with the meal participation rates currently reported for this district’s first half of the 2022-2023 school year.

Participant Profiles

Eight parents participated in one-on-one interviews to discuss their family’s experience with access to free school meals during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years.

Additionally, parents were asked about their experiences since access has ended and students have been returned to a free, reduced, or paid status. The following are the participant profiles of each parent with a pseudonym utilized to protect their family’s confidentiality. The participant profiles are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Participant Profiles

| Name | Employment | Number of Children | Grade Level | Grade Level | Grade Level |
|-----------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Emily | K-12 Educator | 2 | 8 th | 3 rd | |
| Cindy | Higher Education | 3 | 7 th | 5 th | 1 st |
| Heather | K-12 Educator | 2 | 6 th | 1 st | |
| Joanna | Higher Education | 2 | 5 th | 1 st | |
| Holly | Higher Education | 2 | 6 th | 3 rd | |
| Stephanie | Healthcare | 2 | 8 th | 6 th | |
| Mary | Healthcare | 3 | 6 th | 3 rd | Pre-K |
| Nikki | Non-Profit | 1 | 7 th | | |

Emily is a parent and teacher. She has two children, a third-grader and an eighth-grader. Her perspective is unique as she is one of two teachers who participated in the interview process. Her family felt the financial impact of access to free school meals; she stated:

At that point, we didn't feel the benefit as much as we are now that we are back having to pack lunches and buy all the food. If I compare it to right now, it is a huge difference. I bet just our grocery bill, just a rough guess, I would bet we are spending at minimum over \$200 a month just to pack school lunches.

Emily teaches in a large middle school. In addition to her personal experience, she shared her perspective as a teacher and how the eligibility change impacted one of her students.

Well, one specific student that comes to mind, I don't know if she qualifies, but she comes to school often with no food. And said that her father won't let her charge anything and that her father will not let her tell us that she doesn't have food at home. And she can't charge at school, so she's going home hungry. And we can't get her to eat. And I know there's more cases like that; that's just one that we have caught specifically, three days in a row, to be specific. And that's what's going on with this little girl. I think it's a father that's too proud to ask for help.

Cindy is a college professor. She has a first, fifth, and seventh-grade student. She acknowledged the change in eligibility status to have the largest effect on the time spent on meal preparation and a financial impact on their family. She identified access to nutritional options as a large concern for students and families.

You know, other than anecdotally, this wasn't my experience, just hearing my teacher friends talk about overseeing kids' lunches in the cafeteria that are just junk food. So, you know, not that their parents can't afford anything but that they're, even if it's not a

financial thing for some kids, that what it's meant for some families is that they're not getting the nutrition that they were getting before.

Heather is an elementary school teacher. She has a first and sixth-grade student, and the experiences of her two children were very different. Her oldest child has a food allergy which impacted the frequency of his participation in school meals. Her youngest started school during the 2021-2022 school year when meals were free for all students. Her daughter's first experience of paying for school meals started this school year.

It was so nice because we didn't have to think about it. You know, he tried more food because he didn't have to say, "hey, I want to eat this week." I didn't have to worry about do you have money? Or you know, it was just nice that he could eat what he wanted when he wanted. He could eat breakfast too. Which I've always been like, we're not eating breakfast, we're not paying \$2 for fruit loops, so you're going to eat at home. So, he just feels like if he sees something he wants, he can get it. And not have to worry about it, so it helped in that aspect of not having to pack a lunch, to worry, but not only him, I just, I felt so good for all the other kids that I know that this was helpful, probably more helpful than it was to our family. Because it was just a convenience thing for us, but for some people, it was big when you have multiple kids, I'm sure.

Heather shared her perspective as a teacher and what she experiences working in a Title I school.

I have a family that, I guess before COVID they qualified for free and reduced, and then after COVID, the way the father is explaining to me, he is making more money now, but he's still not making enough, he doesn't have enough to put in their accounts, for four kids to feed them. So, he has a negative balance of a lot. And he is sending the kids to school with what he can, and it is not a lunch, and I see the student that I have his

embarrassment of, because you know, he'll have just like a half of a sandwich, or a couple of crackers, and I'm like no. So, his dad has told him, don't you buy lunch, but we have the PTA fund, or I've even offered to pay for his meals, but I told him, you're going to eat. The mama in me is going to make sure you eat. But seeing this child's frustration when I go through the lunch count, and I say, you know, "are you cafeteria or are you a packer?" And he knows he doesn't have an adequate lunch, and he knows that when I see his lunch when we are lining up, and I say you are getting a tray regardless. And then him fearing my dad is going to get mad. And I've tried to explain to him like they've stopped charging him, and now we are making sure these meals are covered. It just breaks my heart that a kid is coming to school worried about can I have; at our school, they are able to get breakfast but not lunch. So, when I think about families like that, and there are a lot of families that are in that boat, you know, they qualified before, but they don't now, and it's great that his dad is making more money, but it's sad that he is not able to provide a good meal for him.

In addition, Heather shared:

They don't have to worry about, you know, do I have money in my account to eat, because I know some cafeterias are great. We have the school funds, PTA funds, but there are kids that are worried about a meal, and they shouldn't be at school.

Joanna teaches and supervises education students for a local university. She has a first and fifth-grade student. Her husband also works in education. When schools began to offer universal free meals, they decided that participation for their children would not be optional. The benefit was there, so they were going to take advantage of it.

But, when we found out that the lunches were going to be free for the school, that's what she ate every day; that's what my kids ate. They ate lunch at school. So, I felt like if the school was going to provide this, we were going to take advantage of it. It was convenient for me. I work part-time, and so lots of times, I was needing to get them out the door for school because I had a school to work with, I had a student teacher to work with, I had a meeting, I had a class to teach. So, it was convenient, but also it was a savings for a middle-class family. Not having to worry with do I have bread, peanut butter, jelly, do I have fresh fruit to pack, just not having to worry with that in my grocery order probably saved maybe \$30 or more dollars a week because groceries are expensive.

Holly is an adjunct professor for a university and has a third and sixth-grade student.

Both of her students participated in free school meals. "We took advantage of it. We used it pretty much every day last year. And normally, my kids were packers. It was just the convenience of it, you know, it was great. We utilized it daily. They both did."

In addition to her role as a professor, she is very active in the PTA at her daughter's elementary school. She shared her observations of how students were impacted through that role:

I know from a PTA perspective, we have been asked before to pay off fines in the cafeteria in schools just because a lot of people build up fines, some don't even know they have them. And, so, that obviously wasn't a burden on anyone else in the past. I don't know if that is something you would care about. That has definitely been a thing, especially coming from a school that is not a Title I school. A lot of kids don't qualify for free lunch, but they benefit from it. It definitely made a big difference in the fact that nobody was asked to pay off fines. Everybody was just taken care of.

Stephanie works in the healthcare field and has two daughters a sixth and an eighth grader. She took advantage of the free meals at school and described the impact on her family:

I just didn't have to think about paying for it, to be honest with you. This sounds crazy to even say, but we used MySchoolBucks a lot, you know when you had to pay for school lunches. It always seemed like there was always a hiccup somewhere, shape or form in there. There would be times that my oldest daughter, would want to go and get you know something for lunch because she wanted to eat lunch, and then there wouldn't be any money on her account for her to get anything. And it was just not something we had to worry about during that time... You know, financially, we didn't have to think about it either. They did enjoy the breakfast more than anything, you know when you would walk in the school, and they would just give you the breakfast? They took advantage of that, and that was awesome for me that I didn't have to make them breakfast in the morning. I knew that they were getting food, if that makes sense, you know their brains were starting to fire because they had food.

Mary also works in the healthcare field and is the mother of a sixth, third, and preschool student. Her youngest is not in a preschool that participated in the free school meals program. She spoke about the ease of obtaining meals during the two years that meals were free and how that affected her oldest child, she said, "it was a relief of stress for us because we didn't have to pack lunches in the morning for our son."

Nikki works for a non-profit organization and is the parent of a seventh grader. Her family's story was different than that of any other parents interviewed due to the financial difficulty they experienced during that time. When asked about the impact of access to free school meals she said:

Well it was really helpful to us because my husband actually got laid off during the pandemic, so he had nine months of not working. I actually work for a non-profit and so it was very hard on my salary and just the unemployment. Even with the unemployment, it didn't really make back what he would typically make. So, especially for the 5th grade year, and even once he did find work you know, it was not at the same pay that it had been before. So those two years were really impactful for us to have the free lunch.

Results

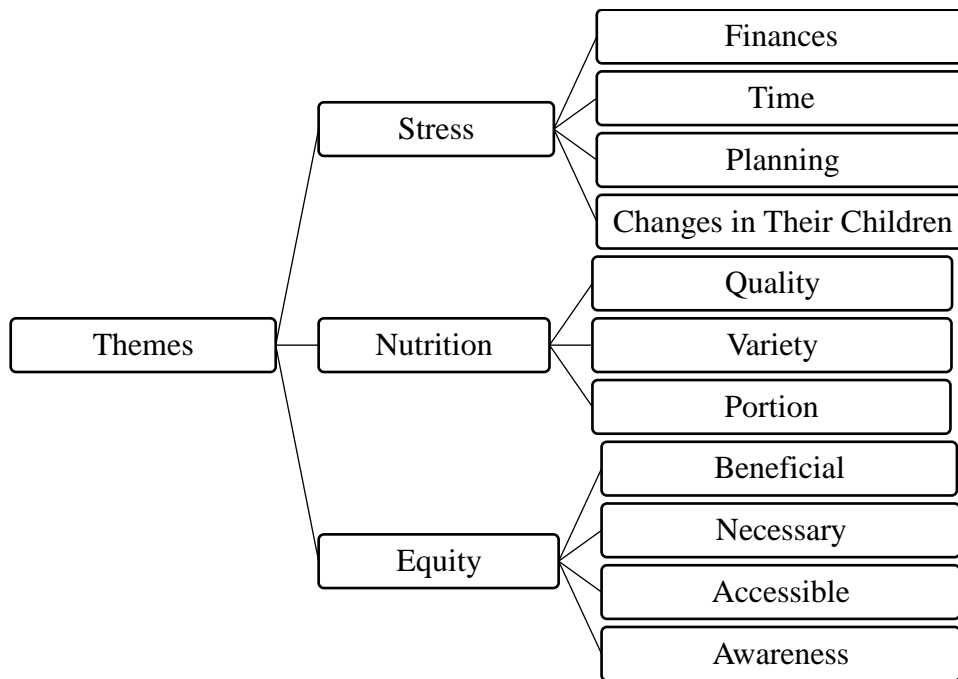
Each interview began with preliminary screener questions to ensure the participants were eligible for the research study. Included were questions about their children's ages and the schools they attended and an explanation of what the researcher was studying. Explaining the nature of the study, allowed the participants to confirm their paid meal status without the researcher having to directly ask. The free, reduced, or paid status of a family is personal and information that should be protected, asking questions in the manner chosen allowed for that information to be shared without causing undue discomfort or stress. All eight parent participants have students with a full-pay status for the 2022-2023 school year.

Interviews were organized and coded as they were completed. Following each interview, the researcher would transcribe the recording and send it to the participant for review and approval. Once the transcription was approved, each participant was assigned a number and the coding document was created. Each question was given a separate sheet in the document and the participant's corresponding answer to each question was organized underneath. Each question was individually reviewed and themes were identified. Following the identification of the minor themes, three major themes of stress, nutrition, and equity emerged.

To ensure the researcher’s interpretation of the data, a secondary coder was used to analyze the interview data. The secondary coder independently reviewed the coding document and assigned minor and major themes. The researcher and the secondary coder met together to talk through the data analysis and to come to a consensus on the identified themes. Table 4 contains the major and minor themes identified by the researcher and the secondary coder.

Table 4

Major and Minor Themes



A total of sixteen students represented eight different families. The parents reported that three students participated in school breakfast every day of the week, seven students participated at least four days per week, four students participated three days a week, and two students participated in school breakfasts two times per week. Many parents mentioned that their students liked the school breakfasts. Joanna and Mary mentioned that even if their students were not hungry when they arrived at school, they would still grab breakfast to save for snack time later in the day.

Heather talked about the social aspect of school breakfasts:

Gosh, he probably got it almost every day. Now he can't, you know with his allergies and stuff, you know, he would just eat the dry cereal, but I mean, it was like a thing because his friends were doing it. So, at his school, instead of having to stay in the little gym, you got to go to the lunchroom. So, he would get it most days just to hang with his friends that were getting it too.

Emily's youngest child attends a school that has universal free breakfast at all times, despite the expiration of COVID-19 legislation, she said, "now my daughter still gets free breakfast, so she will eat when she cannot con daddy into getting something on the way to school. But she'll eat breakfast at school a lot."

Joanna's children had a similar experience as their elementary school provided free breakfasts for all students prior to COVID-19, but that grant has since expired. She says:

At our school, ever since my daughter was in Kindergarten, the school had a grant for free breakfast, so there was always a cart set up outside the cafeteria when students walked in, so they had grab-and-go for free. They've had that since my daughter was in Kindergarten. And, honestly, this year it stopped. So yeah, that stopped this year also for the school.

The parents reported a slightly higher participation rate for school lunches during the two school years that meals were free for all students. It was reported that eight students ate lunch at school every day of the week and eight students participated four days per week. Mary said, "school lunches were every day, every single day. We don't even talk about it anymore, it doesn't matter what is on the menu, we don't even know most days. He's just like, "I'll figure something out."

Emily mentioned, “when it was free, almost daily, almost every single day. When the cafeteria was packing something they didn’t like, we’d skip it and pack on those days, but there was only fish, they always skipped fish day.”

Joanna’s children had a similar experience:

Last year, every day. Every day. There might have been a couple of days a month if they had something after school or if I knew it was something that they weren’t going to eat but they most, I would say most of the time 4-5 days a week if not more than that, they had lunch from school.

Likewise, while meals were free, Holly’s children participated every day, which was a change from past school years. She shared, “we took advantage of it, we used it pretty much every day last year. And normally, my kids were packers. It was just the convenience of it, you know, it was great. We utilized it daily, they both did.”

Nikki shared that her son ate lunch at school, “every day as well. We would give him some money for if he wanted to buy a bag of chips or like ice cream on Friday but yeah, he was typically eating just the free meal every day.”

Stress

In addition to the general impact access to free meals had on their families, participants also explained the impact on their overall level of stress. Emily initially defined her experience as a frustration rather than stress. She said, “I wouldn’t necessarily say stress, more or less frustration. Because we are feeling it in our wallet now. You’re noticing how much it helped at that point in time. Does that make sense?” Her answer reflected the financial frustration they are feeling as a family at this time. In addition, Emily later shared how having access to free school meals was a stress reliever for her family:

You're not stressing in the mornings trying to get your lunches packed, you're not stressing at night, do I have everything I need for breakfast or for packing lunch tomorrow. Or let me check the bank to make sure, or let me check the app to make sure I've got enough money in their account. Do I have enough money in my checking account? You just send them out the door and know that school is taking care of it, that was nice.

Heather mentioned the impact on her family's budget and time. She said:

It's just one more thing you don't have to think of. You know, that morning, that night. It's just another thing you don't have to plan for, you know, when they are eating breakfast at school then I didn't have to buy those breakfast items at the grocery store but mainly it was just a time thing for me. It gave me, anytime I can have 10-15 extra minutes or we can get out the door earlier. So, really it just took away that stress of just another thing we have to do each night, each morning. So, it was just real helpful, you know, in freeing up some time for me.

Joanna described the impact on her planning, worrying, and financial load.

It took a load off, honestly. It took a load off financially with not having to you know, spend an extra \$20 or more on lunch with my groceries that week. But also, it took the brainwork out of the morning. We could just get up, get ready, go to school and everything you need is here for the day. Didn't have to worry about leaving lunch at home or not having lunch money or anything like that there was something provided at school.

The free time created by not having to make breakfasts and pack lunches was mentioned by four of the participants as decreasing their overall level of stress. Holly referenced the impact

on her stress, she said, “It was amazing, I felt like it took a lot of stress off of me to remember the lunch box, to buy the food, to prep it, all that great stuff. I miss free lunch.”

Cindy shared her experience with time and stress:

I would say, getting out the door in the mornings is when it adds the most stress. I try to give my kids as much responsibility as I can, so while I could sit down and make their lunches the night before and make our mornings a little less stressful, I prefer to give them the responsibility to make those with the options they have. So, I give them the choice, they can make it the night before or in the morning, and often they choose the morning, so in terms of stress, it definitely makes our morning, you know, like trying to get people out the door, what I would like to be a more kind of relaxed morning together is sometimes more “I can’t find a vegetable that goes in here” and “I don’t like this kind of bread”.

Additionally, Stephanie identified time as the main point of stress affected by no longer having access to free school meals. She said:

Oh, it took away a lot. There was really no stress. The worst thing is thinking about or when I get a text message from my daughter when I’m coming home from the gym that says will you pack my lunch?... Just knowing that it was there, reduced my stress by a significant amount. It just, it wasn’t something I worried about.

When asked about stress, Mary identified a decrease in stress related to her level of worry. She described the impact of access to free meals on her stress:

Decreased it for sure. I think that’s a really nice thing to know that they are fed and if you forget a snack, they’ll have access to a snack. If he didn’t eat enough breakfast, he’s going to be able to get something there. Not worrying about what to pack or if we have

things to pack, lost lunch boxes are no longer a thing for him... So, definitely a lot of decreased stress for those reasons.

Since access to free meals has been removed, Mary noted a definite increase in stress in the mornings:

It's kind of increased our stress in the morning. Especially, I mentioned my son takes medication, he doesn't get breakfast anymore just because he feels like he shouldn't because he's buying lunch too. We've never really told him that per se, so in the morning we are trying to get more breakfast into him, having to pay attention to how many snacks, if he has enough with him. That's kind of the stress for us. We didn't think about any of that for what a year or two. And now we are thinking, okay, do you have enough snacks in your locker, do you have enough in your backpack to put in your locker? We have to have those conversations when they weren't there before and like I said he doesn't eat breakfast anymore.

Nikki shared how access to free meals impacted her stress during that time:

It definitely reduced it because I wasn't having to worry about how was I going to add money to the account this week. Are we going to not pay a bill and pay for food? You know that kind of thing, so it definitely decreased my stress.

In addition, she shared how the change in her family's eligibility for access to free school meals impacted her stress this school year:

... as far as just general anxiety, yeah. Especially during the pandemic there was a lot of it. I think I was a little nervous going into the school year about starting to pay for it and things like that you know, like I said my husband was able to get a better job so that has helped to cut down on it.

Finances

All of the parent participants except one reported experiencing some form of financial stress associated with paying for school meals. While Stephanie did not report financial stress, she did mention that it became something that she no longer had to think about financially.

Really the only thing, I just didn't have to think about paying for it, to be honest with you. This sounds crazy to even say, but we used MySchoolBucks a lot, you know when you had to pay for school lunches. It always seemed like there was always a hiccup somewhere, shape or form in there. There would be times that my oldest daughter would want to go and get you know something for lunch because she wanted to eat lunch, and then there wouldn't be any money on her account for her to get anything. And it was just not something we had to worry about during that time.

Emily did feel like her family experienced financial stress. She explained the impact on her family:

Just the way it's impacting a financially stable, middle-class family. I don't see how people that are struggling are doing it. Like I think about the elementary families, it's the working poor over there. A lot of them don't qualify for extra stuff, so I know it's impacting them.

In addition, Emily referenced finances when asked if they experienced any anxiety throughout the program and now no longer have access to free lunches for her children. She shared:

I dreaded it, but now that we're fully paying grocery bills, yeah, I'm definitely, you feel the financial crunch. Middle-class family feeling the financial crunch from paying for school lunch. I know it's not horrible for us, but still.

Finally, Emily also mentioned the impact on their grocery budget:

The frustration, the feeling it in grocery budget which in turn affects your household budget. And of course, thinking about families that are not as financially stable as we are, how are they doing it? I don't see how they are doing it because I see how much our grocery bill has gone up.

Cindy talked about the tradeoffs that paying for school meals has on her family's budget and how they manage it:

In terms of money, I felt more free. One of the things we like to do with our grocery money is have people over for dinner, and I just can't do that as much when I'm buying three kids three school lunches, which I don't do every day. Now that we are back, they are probably buying twice a week and we are packing the other days... We can afford to buy them school lunches part of the time, but it definitely is like a tradeoff for other things that we would you know, some days, maybe not all, prefer to use the time and the money for... The money is going to come from somewhere else, I don't have never-ending grocery money, but I do know that for other people, that changes drastically what their kids are eating, for mine it's just a tradeoff for time and money that we would use for other things.

Similar to Emily, Cindy also mentioned finances when asked about any anxiety her family experienced.

I mean when I found out we weren't going to have it anymore, you know, kind of sitting down to calculate out three kids, times this many lunches, it was like oh gosh. So, I mean I would say in the moment of figuring out what that would mean for our upcoming budget.

Heather mentioned the impact on her family's finances when returning to a paid status for this school year and how big of a help access to free meals actually was for her family.

I know when he was younger he didn't know that it cost to eat, like Kindergarten, so I remember getting a notice you have like negative \$40 and I had to say like, I can't afford for you to eat breakfast you know at school like it's just too much... So, it did help. I didn't realize how much it helped until it started again and we had to pay, and then I was like, we went like it was almost two years, three years? Three years, that we didn't have to pay anything so, you know, it didn't feel like a big thing then but when I had to turn around and pay, then my daughter started school too and wanted to eat some too, I could feel it. And I thought it would be nice if it were free.

In addition, when asked how things have changed, Heather shared:

The convenience of it, not have to worry, not have to budget out that money each paycheck. But just, you know, the fact that when they wanted to eat they could just go up and you know, not have to, I would always tell my daughter at the beginning, you've got to tell me when you're going to eat and you know, she wasn't used to that and neither was my son... A couple of years, you know, we'd just eat whenever we want to, pick up breakfast if we see it is something that we like, so I had to get away from that. I had to be real diligent of making sure they had money since they weren't going to tell me if they were eating, for them to keep track of that. But no, just hassle-free, not having to worry about that piece every week, yeah you can eat if you want to and no you don't have any money and I haven't gotten paid, so let's just eat what we have here. It was just nice to be able to have that that flexibility.

Joanna recognized the monetary impact it had on her middle-class family.

It was convenient, but also it was a savings for a middle-class family. Not having to worry with do I have bread, peanut butter, jelly, do I have fresh fruit to pack, just not having to worry with that in my grocery order probably saved maybe \$30 or more dollars a week because groceries are expensive.

In addition, Joanna shared how finances impact her children's participation in school meals now that they are no longer free:

It has to be something that my kids really like in order for me to pay \$2.50 for and I know that makes me sound like a giant tightwad but you know, if each of them buy their lunch twice a week, \$10 a week, that's \$40. It adds up.

Holly said, "I would definitely say it's a financial impact to pack lunch every day.

Compared to free at school. Definitely, upped the grocery budget."

When asked about financial stress, Mary brought up the embarrassment that comes with forgetting to load money onto her children's accounts. She said:

We're not used to paying attention to that anymore. So, when we first started getting charged again, because like I told you it was going faster than we thought, you know my son was buying some extra things. We learned that they get a paper home when there is a balance, and we just felt really embarrassed by that, honestly, we just didn't notice. We weren't trying to be a problem and I felt like that was potentially embarrassing for my son too. It was just simply, we have busy lives, we just didn't notice, we didn't realize and you know, I don't want, I think it is silly to have that kind of embarrassment for the kids for them to have to bring home a paper to kind of slap the parents on the hand and be like hey, you've got to pay. Thankfully we saw it and paid, but for that to inhibit his ability to get a lunch makes me upset because it does say that, you know if you are in

excess of a certain amount. So, we did get one of those letters, we've learned our lesson since then, but it's just kind of embarrassment all around. So, that, I felt like that was kind of the stress about it.

In addition to embarrassment, Mary also mentioned the anxiety that comes with ensuring that her children have access to what they need and a part of that is financial.

Yes, the anxiety of remembering to put money on because you know, we got that letter. The anxiety of making sure he has what he needs came back, you know like having to make snacks and make sure he has enough breakfast, knowing that he is going to be a lot less willing to go and do that. It does add a lot more to our day for sure. And I mean there is a financial aspect too of course. Like it is nicer when it is free, like for us to not have to pay because he does eat a good bit. They're discounted, but you know, 5 days a week and you keep multiplying it out, it does add up quickly.

Finally, Mary noted the service fees associated with using MySchoolBucks to pay for student meals:

So, for us, there's this anxiety about continuing to load it, you do have to pay a service fee every time you load it which I think is silly... You know, it's kind of nonsense that they have to have a service fee too, so you know there is some kind of financial aspect to it for sure.

For Nikki, the impact on the financial stress of their family was evident, she shared:

Well you know, I think I do have the stress of having that low balance notification pop up. I will say, my husband has found a job that is much more equivalent to what it was before. So, I don't think for us the financial concern is as big, you know, I mean we can pay for it. We spend almost \$90 a month usually on breakfast and lunch if he does both.

And, I don't think he eats breakfast as much now that he knows we are paying for it. Sometimes he grabs something here before he goes. I think as far as financially we've been okay, and been able to afford it, but I think it has cut down on how much he eats breakfast at least at school and just the stress of having to "oh my gosh did I remember to add money to the account" and that kind of thing.

While experiencing anxiety was only reported by five out of the eight participants, all participants did identify some type of stress related to the change in access to free school meals for their children. Those feelings and experiences of stress ranged from financial, worry, anxiety, and stress related to time.

Time

The acknowledgement of stress related to time and planning, was discussed further in how the change in access to free meals affected the time allocated for preparing breakfasts and lunches each day. Emily and Joanna estimated that an additional fifteen minutes is needed every morning to get breakfasts and lunches ready for their children now that they do not have access to free meals at school.

Cindy talked about the impact on the pace of their mornings and the stress the packing meals created for one of her children:

It definitely made evenings and mornings a little less stressful... especially the breakfast part. One of my children is very slow in the mornings, so having the option for them to eat when they get to school gave us a little more family time, and just didn't feel as rushed. One of my kids especially is old enough to make his own food but is very stressed out by it. And so, yeah, so I would say in terms of time, our mornings were much calmer.

Heather mentioned how much easier it is to get to school on time when her children have access to breakfast at school:

Anytime I don't have to pack a lunch because I'm packing three, it's amazing. It's just you know, cutting fruit, you know, and just I don't even know how much time it takes me, but it feels like 30 minutes at least a night... And then breakfast, if they're not eating breakfast at home, then we can leave earlier and get to school on time. And I can get to school on time... Get out of the door eat breakfast at school, lunch at school, it was great.

Holly mentioned that access to free breakfast in particular saved a lot of time for her family. She said that, "especially breakfast because if you are in a rush they can just grab it on the way in to school... When they'd have breakfast at home, they'd grab it to have it for snack later."

Stephanie reiterated the change in stress in her home when her children had access to free meals at school. She said:

It freed up a lot of time and fights too. It was less stress on everyone... We just knew there was going to be food at school. So, if they didn't pack their lunch, I wasn't stressing out that they weren't going to eat.

For Mary's family, access to free meals at school completely changed their morning routine:

My son is the earliest to leave in the morning, so that was really nice for us like not to have to worry about that. So, we didn't have to pack lunch, we didn't have to think about that in our family like grocery bills and stuff too, or I guess grocery planning because the kinds of things that he would pack for lunch were different than I would otherwise probably buy because there's like select things he would like. So, it actually changed our

morning routine enough that we just pack a water bottle now and if he gets up late sometimes he'll eat breakfast too. So, that was nice to know that he could just ride on the bus and not have to worry about not having time to eat something on the way, so he started eating breakfast sometimes too because of that. Definitely decreased our time in the morning and our stress around the mornings if he didn't eat enough especially, you know he's a kid that takes medication in the morning, so that was a big impact for us. Like, he has to have food in his stomach. Sometimes he wasn't always hungry, so we always told him if he felt like he didn't eat enough or if he felt like he needed something else to grab something at school. It was nice that it was readily available. And sometimes he would keep his breakfast food as snacks for later so that was a nice impact as well. Nikki shared similar thoughts about how access to free school meals impacted her time: Well it decreased it because I didn't have to do any of that in the morning, so it allowed him to get a little extra sleep. And me too, to not have to try to cook breakfast or make it, so he would just get on the bus and eat it at school.

Planning

Heather mentioned the planning needed to use the app, MySchoolBucks:

I had to download the app, get them on this app so that I could make sure that I was putting in money. Because, you know, you don't want to be that parent that you can't get your breakfast today, it's negative. So, just having to keep track of that, I have a reminder on my phone for every Sunday to make sure after I pay Educare, that they have food, they have money for breakfasts and lunches when they need it.

Joanna shared the stress related to meal planning and how that impacted her:

Just planning ahead. I sat down with the kids before the school year started and we made like a list of possible lunches, what do you want to eat, what can I fix you to eat? That sort of thing and kind of made a matrix. So, I just kind of pick and choose, and sometimes they pick, but it's just the planning and the thought, it's just one more thing to do.

Likewise, Holly mentioned the stress associated with planning and packing lunches:

It just made things simpler. I also think it's great when your child forgets a lunch. There's no pressure, they can just go straight through the line even if they don't normally do that, so that was great. But mainly just the stress of daily packing is back, and it wasn't there last year.

Initially, Stephanie did not see a big change in how she was affected by the change in access to free school meals, but later she identified meal planning as an area that required more attention than before:

I don't think it's changed that much to be honest, day to day. Well, now I have to make lunches, in the big of scheme of things it's not that big. One more thing to think about.

Now I have to think about what's for lunch, what's for breakfast, and what's for dinner.

Changes in Their Children

The participants were asked a couple of questions regarding the impact they perceived access to free school meals had on their children. Four of the participants did not notice any significant changes in their children since access to free meals has ended. Emily did not consider her children to have experienced any changes, she shared:

Well the kids would make little comments, I don't have to worry about it, I can eat at school. Or the days that they would pack, there would be days that my daughter would

pack her lunch, and then she would eat free. They're happy-go-lucky, they're not worried about it. They're going, "it's fine".

Similar to the response of Emily's children, when asked about changes in her children Heather said, "no, I haven't seen a difference in them, they don't have to pay for it so they really don't care."

In contrast, Cindy shared a change that she saw in one of her children:

I do have one child that it's just too early for him to eat breakfast before he leaves for school. He's in middle school. And so, he doesn't, if there was a free breakfast at school he would probably eat it, but the time he has to leave in the morning to get to school, he just can't, like his stomach isn't awake yet. So, I do have one kid that since the program has stopped he no longer eats breakfast. And again, he's not starving, like he's eating plenty of food, but that is one big change for him.

Stephanie shared a change in her children's participation in school meals, "we don't ever use school lunch. We haven't had school lunch since then."

Mary also noticed a change in her son since the school's returned to meals for purchase:

I have noticed, my son is not eating breakfast and he was kind of more shy about accidentally charging things over what was included. That's an unintentional thing on our part, he just wanted to know why his money was going down so fast so we showed him... I don't think that should matter. The things he is buying are like an extra fruit or an extra milk, that shouldn't matter. Like those aren't poor choices on his part and if he is hungry he should eat it. I don't want to discourage kids from eating when they are hungry, so I don't like that aspect of it.

Mary mentioned that her son began to adjust his choices in the lunchroom based on the fact that items cost more and not on whether or not he needs more to eat:

The thing that was nice about the free program was I think they had access to a lot of things. What we have noticed now, is that if he buys a similar lunch to what he had before, there's all kinds of extra charges, you know, extra for a bag of chips, extra for an extra milk. The kind of things that he probably was able to get for free, so we're loading that card a lot... And when we talk to him about it and we're like did you know that's not included, and he kind of feels bad. And we're not doing it in that manner we're just letting you know just know that this is extra, but if you are thirsty, like get an extra milk. It's making him not go to the lunchroom and just pick what he wants because that's how much he needs or that's what food he wants. He's having to think about like what's included versus what are mom and dad going to see that I had to pay extra for and I don't know that they understand that process... My son just likes to be more involved and wants to know those things. I imagine for some kids if their parents don't want them buying extra that could be complex... We just want our kids to eat when they are hungry, we don't want it to be that difficult.

In addition, Mary noted changes she has seen in her daughter's anxiety since the beginning of this school year:

I just kind of wanted to emphasize the point about how I think that it really reduces the anxiety students have about going through the line. You know, my daughter is one that has a lot of anxiety about going through the line and they even were providing uncrustables and things that she loves, they provide them now but during COVID, I could get her to go through and get milk and extra things. But now, when she has to pay for

that, she has an anxiety and she won't go through the line. So, I just wanted to add that I think that the ability for kids to just get what they need, get what they're hungry for, and to walk through the line without any problems, questions, paperwork, access issues.

Really reduces their lunchtime anxiety and I think that's important.

Nikki shared that the only change she has seen is her son "chooses to not eat breakfast as often" now that breakfast is no longer free at school.

Nutrition

Access to nutritionally sound food options is important for students. Throughout the interviews, the nutritional value of the school meals that were offered was brought up by five of the parent participants.

Quality

Cindy shared her concerns regarding the quality of what was offered for school breakfasts. While she recognized that sometimes anything is better than nothing, she noted:

I would say the only thing that bothered me was the sugar breakfasts. They tended to be pretty high in sugar. Which I understand is a way to get food into kids' bodies before school, so that's probably the only thing that I would complain about.

Now that her students no longer qualify for free school meals, Holly shared concerns about the value and quality of school lunches for the price that it costs to purchase them:

We now pack lunch every day... my students do not qualify for reduced or free lunch. I feel like for the quality of the food for the price, it wasn't worth paying for it, so they pretty much pack every day now.

Mary shared the positive experiences her son had participating in school meals.

I felt like he was eating good things and adequate foods, there was a nice variety, even if he didn't like the main lunches there was always something that was available to him so we were very satisfied with what was provided and the fact that it was easy on the parents too.

Variety

Joanna mentioned several lunch items that her children enjoy, even her daughter who she describes a picky eater. She identified the opportunity to try new foods as a strength of the school meals program:

My daughter loves popcorn chicken, she loves chicken legs, she loves brunch for lunch, she loves pizza. So, there were certain things every month when we would get the calendar before the meals were free that we had money in her lunch account that if she wanted that she could choose that for her lunch instead of me packing for her... Another thing too is that my daughter is a little bit, she's my 5th grader, she's a little bit of a picky eater and my 1st grader is not. So last year, when lunches were free, you know my son was all about it... Like he loved everything, sometimes he would eat his lunch and someone else's because he loved it so much. But for her, because a lot of her friends their parents also felt the same way that we did that if the school is going to provide food, you're going to eat at school. So, for her, it kind of gave her the opportunity to try foods that maybe she wouldn't try if I fixed them at home. Or you know what, this is for lunch and I'm hungry, so I guess I better eat it because nobody is going to slip me an uncrustable or come up with another option. So, it gave her an opportunity to try new things.

Like Joanna, Mary mentioned the variety of options available to her children as a strength of the school food program. She shared:

I think it was good too because it made my son try more foods too. Like he just kind of decided that he was going to buy lunch each day because it was provided, and a lot of other kids were doing it. So, he wanted to try foods that he didn't maybe before.

In addition, Mary shared:

There were certain things you could add on additionally, like you could get milk for free all the time. Things like that are great for kids. It increases I think their knowledge of healthy eating, when they know that there are healthy choices that are free. Maybe you have to buy the cookies, but the milk is for free. I think it kind of helps them to pick and choose what are healthier choices and guides them in the right way.

Portion

Emily mentioned her only concern for the meals provided for students was the portion size. Her son is in eighth grade, and she shared, "I didn't really have any concerns, other than chicken nugget day that my son griped, and that's school nutrition right there. 'Mom, I can't fill up off of three chicken nuggets.'"

Likewise, Holly shared similar concerns regarding the portion sizes, she said, "I feel like the quality of the meals was not great and the portion sizes were small. But, I do feel like it was a huge benefit that it was offered."

Equity

Several participants described access and equity as important pieces of universal free school meals.

Beneficial

All eight participants agreed that access to free meals was beneficial for all children.

Cindy mentioned the rights that public school children have:

I do understand that there are many families that have no problem paying for school lunch or that would prefer to pack their own lunches, but especially for families, I know that part of your research is families that are borderline that can pay for school lunches but it's really cutting into their spending money, I think there's just a lot of families in that bracket. Where the option to have free lunch whether they took it or not, could make a big difference. Not only like on a regular budget but as things change, you know, jobs change and inflation happens, it provides a nice kind of stability, one more place where money is not, it feels like you're not being stalked left and right. And I feel like public school is one of the places where kids should have equal rights to things, and you know, we say kids should have equal rights to education, like you can't be educated if you are hungry. And, and I know that trying to do an income-based program is one way to do that, it's just all ways are flawed, we are maybe missing some people that way.

Heather reiterated the experience she has as a teacher in a Title I school and the needs that she sees in her classroom:

I think it is great that kids can eat when they want to eat and not have to worry about financial issues, so I definitely think that it is beneficial across the board. It helps as a teacher when you know that your kids are fed.

Holly agreed that the program was beneficial, but she mentioned funding and how to ensure that it is a priority. She said, "oh gosh, yes. But I wonder how does it get funded. You

know what I mean? The billions of dollars that we just throw away to a road to nowhere should go somewhere. And it should go to this.”

Necessary

In addition to considering the program to be beneficial, all eight participants consider access to free meals to be necessary. Emily mentioned how financially necessary access to free school meals is for families. She said, “you’ve got middle-class families that are struggling just as much as your lower-income families. This inflation, this let’s get paid better wages... it’s an excuse to raise prices on everything.”

Cindy addressed the nutritional value the meals bring as necessary for many families. She said:

I think it would be necessary for some kids, you know, necessary is a hard word to define. I think that for some, for a particular group of kids, for them to get the nutrition they need to learn well, it is necessary.

In addition, Heather believes that access to free meals is beneficial and wondered if other places can provide this benefit, then how her district can also provide it:

I do, no I definitely do... If it is something that school systems can figure out how to do and how to get the funding then I think that it’s important that our kids in Tennessee or wherever, these families don’t have to worry about meals. When you think about school fees, when you think about all the other things that go along with what we have to do as parents, then this would just be great to not have to worry about it. Because I’ve heard of places that don’t have to pay for food and it’s interesting to see how they’ve done it even before COVID. I know we had all the COVID money to help with this but, surely, we could figure a way to keep it going so we can help families.

Heather continued:

I was hopeful that this would keep going, you know, because why can't we feed our kids that go to school in the United States? Why hasn't anyone thought of this before? I'm thinking if they could do it for you know, those two years almost, then why can't we keep it up? I'm a parent of course, but when I think about my students like it was big. I've heard from a lot of, and I hope you get to hear from some of those families, it really has helped, it really helped and now it's a burden for a lot of people... If we could do it for that long then let's keep it up. Feed our kids, it's important to their education that their bellies are full.

Joanna mentioned the role of the state in providing access to meals:

I mean it's an added benefit to a free public education. You know, theoretically, the state provides a free education, and paying the fees and things like that are technically optional because it is supposed to be free. I feel like our state has proven that we can provide lunch for free and breakfast for free and so I feel that it should continue.

Holly and Stephanie agreed that access to free meals is necessary for children. Stephanie simply stated, "it's children."

Mary talked about the needs of children and families that are not always evident:

I think that we don't always know, we don't always identify the students that struggle with food. The students that have food insecurities. And, I think I have also realized that even though a family might have a good income, it doesn't mean that they have all of their other priorities in line and that they're providing adequately. I know that my son always brings extra snacks to school because there are all kinds of kids that don't bring snacks and these are not kids that you would look at it and think maybe they don't have

enough money, you wouldn't probably identify them. You know, parents are busy, they might not think to bring snacks, they might not remember these things so just knowing that the kids are taken care of fully at school and everybody has equal access I think is a great thing. And, I think it is something that should be available to all.

Finally, Nikki shared, "I think the funding going toward free lunches for everybody is definitely a necessary thing."

Accessible

As a part of equity, children having access to meals at school is important and the ease of access through this program was noted by multiple participants.

Emily shared her experiences as a teacher and the benefit that everyone automatically qualifying created for students:

There's families out there that are proud, that do not want to ask for help, and that program provided them with the anonymity, that they were getting that help without having to ask for it. And everybody was getting it and taking advantage so they weren't worried about the pride thing.

Cindy mentioned how easy it was to access food as a strength of the program, she said, "as far as I can remember, we didn't ever sign anything, like we just showed up and got food... I imagine there are kids who need school lunch whose parents can't figure out how to fill out the forms." In addition, Cindy noted:

I would say probably my biggest comment on the program is just that access to parents is not the same thing as access to kids. Programs where parents have to jump through hoops to get their kid enrolled in them is not the same as "here child, is a breakfast" when you

walk in the door. So, like to me, that was one of the biggest things of the program was that like, if you were there you had access.

Heather mentioned access as well:

I think that it is something that we need to work on making it permanent so that students don't have to pay for meals no matter their income. I think that it's just benefiting our kids because it is all about them and making sure that they have, you know, their needs met before they take part in learning. And you know, for a lot of kids in our system, these meals are important, and they might be the only hot ones that they get that day. So, it's important that they have access to them no matter what.

In addition, Heather noted changes she saw at school with her students, she said, "I noticed that a lot of my students were, more of them were getting their lunches than have in the past from school than packing."

Joanna addressed the ease of the program, she said, "it was a free for all. Everyone's on an even playing field. Everyone has access to breakfast. Everyone has access to lunch. You just go through the line and get it. It was easy." Joanna mentioned an experience with her son at the beginning of the school year and how it shaped her mindset:

My son, the very first week of school brought me the free lunch form that you have to fill out for your income. And he said, "Mommy, if you'll just fill this out, I can have lunch for free" ... I do think that for him and he's younger, most of the kids in his class bought their lunch every day. And so, for him, there was no difference in maybe you don't have food at home and that is why you're eating at school. I don't know that he could come up with that on his own but when I would ask questions it was just no big deal that I buy my lunch every day and all my friends do and this is what we do. And so, I do think in his

little mind, everyone is on an even playing field, as far as having food and doing the same thing, it kind of created some common ground there. Whereas this year a lot more of those kids are packing their lunch or the kids who do qualify are buying their lunch.

Holly shared a similar mindset when considering access to free school meals, she said, “no one was discriminated against, every kid just got the same thing, so that was good.”

Likewise, Stephanie noted concern for others, she said, “the most disappointment that I had was when it ended and the thought of people who probably needed it more than me what were they going to do. That was probably more of it than anything.”

Mary noted how easy it was for children to get access to what they needed:

I thought it was very simple. If you want a lunch you get one. It’s free for everybody...

And, I think it decreases any stress for those who aren’t sure if there is money in their accounts or concern about payment there’s no concern of that. So, then everyone can just eat and that just seems like a basic human right, honestly, access to food... So just the fact that it was just so easy, everyone could just kind of go through, you didn’t have to worry about those things... Which I mean, I don’t know if we think about those things, but especially when you are little you know you don’t want to be standing there holding your tray or drop your tray. All that stuff is really a real insecurity in kids, so anything to make it easier on them.

In addition, Mary mentioned the embarrassment that students feel when they need food and how access to these meals for everyone helped with that:

They’re trying to make their way through all this and that’s one thing, that’s one worry they shouldn’t have... It’s really unfortunate, but that’s a side effect of all this is that they are learning where they can go or the avenues that they have to go to. And they have to

be kind of like sneaky about food or trying to find maybe their guidance counselor in a private way. Because I think that there's an embarrassment associated with this, there's an embarrassment with not feeling like they have enough or being hungry. We need to remove that stigma and that embarrassment so that, you know those kids are the ones that should be first in line saying, hey, I have trouble at home, you know can I get food at school. They should feel safe at school.

Finally, Mary shared her son's experiences with stress and how access to free meals helped with that process in the lunchroom:

I think there's a little bit of stress for the kids when they're paying for the lunches, or having to scan their cards, or talk to the people at the lunch lane, and I think that it kind of got rid of that anxiety for him because the lunch line moves really fast, nobody had to like stop and pay. There was nobody that had any issues with their cards or anything, so for those who are a little more shy for buying lunch which I think my son was previously, there wasn't any resistance to him buying lunch anymore. He was just able to go through and not worry about whether there was money on his card, if it was going to take too long to get through the line, all those things kind of changed during that time when it was just available. Which I think was nice.

Nikki shared how the ease of access impacted her family:

I mean I felt like it was, it was very easy. You know there wasn't a lot, we did turn in paperwork the first year just to show the layoff, you know, change in pay. We really didn't have to do a lot for it and that was really nice to just not have to fill out a lot of paperwork, or do anything extra for it, you just kind of went and got it.

Awareness

Three participants mentioned a lack of awareness surrounding access to free meals, whether that was the needs of students or the impact that access had on their families.

Heather shared:

I never thought about it until we had the grant, all the meals were free so, I never, sad to say, I never thought about how it impacted me or other people. But now that we went so long with this funding, I just think that it's a no brainer that we need to do what we can do to make this happen for everybody.

Stephanie discussed her experience:

I was actually shocked because I didn't realize that was what was happening. I mean I guess they said it was happening and then I just never realized that it was happening. And then the girls would say, we had lunch at school today, and I'd be like you don't have any money in your account. And they'd be like, oh no, it's free. It's almost like I didn't early on, and I didn't realize that it lasted as long as it did either. I didn't realize there was two years of me not thinking about it.

Mary mentioned a lack of awareness of the enormity of the needs of students at the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year when free school meals were no longer available for all students:

Just hearing stories from school as well as from our guidance counselor starting a closet for food. And realizing within the first week or two that there were kids that just did not have snacks and food coming from home or access to food, and the need for that food cabinet started as soon as this program ended. And, my son is one to bring like 20 snacks a week for him to have 5 snacks a week. He's one to bring extra food and always have it

in his locker and his friends are eating his food all the time. And I always told him, that's fine, that's what I want him to do. You know, his friends want a snack that's what he should do, but I'm just noticing there is a need because of things like that. You know when he brings an entire twenty pack of applesauce in the beginning of the week and next week he needs another one, you know that there is a need, right. But, I think there's a lot of people that are being generous and helping in those aspects, it just makes you realize that it is a real problem when you hear those stories.

Overall Impression

Parents were given the opportunity to share their overall impressions of the school district's implementation of free school meals for all students during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. All eight participants reported being pleased with how the program was implemented in their students' schools. When given the opportunity to share any concerns about how the program operated, six out of eight parents indicated that they had no complaints. The only concerns expressed were regarding the quality of food offered and the portion sizes.

Emily shared her final thoughts on having access to free meals at school, she said, "I miss it. In all caps, exclamation point, flashing neon sign. Like fifteen exclamation points." Cindy said, "I thought it was great... I mean in terms of ease, like it's a really great way for kids to get food... so that part of it seemed great." As a teacher, Heather shared, "I thought it was great, I thought it was, you know, straightforward. I thought families realized that they had the lunches."

Joanna shared her thoughts on how it impacted her family:

We miss having it. It really, it was so convenient. It was just very mindless. Get your shoes, get your backpack, let's go to school. We have a stable home. Two parents, and a

car that starts, and you know, heat. Families who have access to very little, they know if they drop their kids off they'll be fed.

In addition, Joanna noted:

It was just a convenience for our family. It was one less thing to worry about. It saved us money because we did not have to buy extra groceries for lunch. It was just an easy process. And again, it put my children and their peers on an even playing field. Most of them went through the cafeteria line every day. It was great. We miss it.

Holly said, "I think overall it was a great program that we utilized very frequently. And, we miss it. I think that would be our overall consensus of the free meal program."

Stephanie shared the importance of the program continuing, she said, "I was impressed by it. But yeah, overall, I think it's a great program and like I said before, I think we need to get funding for it and I think it needs to happen." Mary said, "We loved it. I mean we were actually sad to see it go. We really loved it. It was one less thing for us to worry about and think about."

Finally, Nikki shared her final thoughts on the overall impression of access to free school meals during the two school years, she said:

I think it went really well. I feel like it was a very seamless process, there was no red tape or hoops to jump through. I really love that it gave access to my child and a lot of other children that have struggles, you know just knowing that they were fed. I think that also impacts grades and things, whenever they can go to school and focus on school and not worry about being hungry. Overall, I mean, I felt like it was a really great program. I'm sad it left.

Chapter Summary

The above data includes district-level meal participation rates for a five-year period. The data summarizes the overall number of meals purchased and details participation rates by subgroup for free, reduced, and paid status students. In addition, the experiences of eight parents and their families are outlined. The parents described the stress experienced by no longer having access to free school meals, the perceived nutritional value of school meals, the need for equity in access for all students, and their overall impression of the district's implementation of free school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter 5 will contain further discussion on the data and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5

Findings, Recommendations, Conclusions

This qualitative study aimed to gather and analyze the experiences of families affected by the universal free meals offered through the MEALS Act and the COVID-19 Child Nutrition Response Act. The MEALS Act and the COVID-19 Child Nutrition Response Act contained school nutrition waivers that, when implemented, provided access to free school meals for all students from March 2020 until the expiration of the waivers on June 30, 2022 (Moss et al., 2020; USDA, n.d.). This study sought to understand families' experiences during free breakfast and lunch access for all students and to provide insight into the economic and emotional needs of families.

The following research questions guided this study: (1) What were the experiences of families with access to universal free school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic whose income otherwise restricts access? (2) What were the experiences of families concerning access to universal meals and resources (e.g., financial budget, time allocated toward breakfast and lunch preparation)? (3) What were the perceptions of families concerning quality of life with access to universal meals? (4) What were the perceived anxiety levels of families during and after participation in the universal free school meals program? (5) What was the perceived overall stress level of families throughout participation in the universal free school meals program? (6) What thoughts do parents and guardians have regarding the program implementation? (7) What overall impressions do parents and guardians have of receiving free school meals during COVID-19?

Eight parents of students in a public school district in the south were interviewed to gather information. All the parents interviewed had an income that resulted in a full-pay status

for school meals for the 2022-2023 school year, making their families ineligible for free school meals. The parent participants had students that represented six of the ten schools invited to participate in the study.

Utilizing a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to conduct thorough interviews, which created opportunities for participants to explore their experiences. Parent participants recalled their experiences during the two school years that the waivers were in place and how things were different for their family during the 2022-2023 school year when access to free school meals for all students has ended. In addition to interviews, meal participation rates provided by the district over a five-year period were reviewed to gain a better understanding of the change the district experienced concerning meal participation for all students and across subgroups.

Discussion of Findings

Children are expected to achieve academically despite their level of access to basic physical resources. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, children are most likely to achieve academic success when their physiological, safety, love, and esteem needs have been met (Noltemeyer et al., 2021). The basic physiological need for access to food impacts a student's ability to learn in the classroom. Access to free meals at school eliminates a barrier to learning, and when meals were free for all students during COVID-19, more students participated in school meals (Andreyeva & Sun, 2021; Cohen et al., 2022; Landry & Simmons, 2022; Moss et al., 2020; Noltemeyer et al., 2012). When school meals are free, more students are likely to eat thus providing a higher likelihood that meeting the physical needs described in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs will be achieved.

Students in this school district participated in school meals at a higher rate when meals were free for all students. The most notable rise in participation was from students who came from families that would have been considered to be full-pay. In addition, students from families with a reduced-pay status also participated in school meals at a higher rate. This aligns with the research presented by Turner et al. (2019), which noted that students with a reduced pay status are more likely to participate in school meals when they are free for all students due to decreased stigma and the absence of the financial burden that reduced meal prices can create.

These findings suggest that students with a reduced or paid status may participate in school meals at a higher rate if school meals are free for all students. Eliminating barriers to meal access for all students affects students and families at risk of food insecurity by reducing the stigma associated with school meal participation (Gunderson et al., 2011; Kinsey et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2019). Students who are at risk, enter school in a position of disadvantage to their peers (Kleinman et al., 2002). When meals are offered for free, more students are likely to eat, addressing one aspect of the physiological level of Maslow's Hierarch of Needs.

Throughout the interviews, participants shared a decrease in their stress related to finances, time, and feeling of worry and anxiety. Access to free school meals for their students alleviated some of the stress they were experiencing. Free school meals created one less thing for parents to think about concerning family budgets and time spent packing and preparing meals. Similar to students, parents experience Maslow's deficiency and growth needs. Life experiences are dynamic and circumstances for families and individuals can change, creating temporary changes to the attainment of deficiency needs (Noltemeyer et al., 2021).

The interview results aligned with the research outlined by Perez-Escamilla and Pinheiro de Toledo Vianna (2012) regarding parental stress. These findings suggest that access to free

school meals can decrease parental stress related to finances and time. Additionally, the participants reported anxiety related to returning to paying for meals, which aligns with research regarding parents' anxiety (Gee & Asim, n.d.; Kotchick et al., 2021). Despite all the participants in this study living in food-secure households, they experienced feelings of stress and anxiety related to the change in access to free meals at school. This finding suggests that access to free school meals can benefit families from all socioeconomic backgrounds, not just families experiencing or at risk of experiencing food insecurity.

The interview results regarding equity in access to free school meals aligned with the Theoretical Framework of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, specifically the concept of "Maslow before Bloom," which is often referenced by educators (Mutch & Peung, 2021; Noltemeyer et al., 2021). For students to have the greatest likelihood of reaching Maslow's growth need of self-actualization, students must have their deficiency needs met first (Noltemeyer et al., 2021). The first deficiency need is physiological, which encompasses food (Noltemeyer et al., 2021). These findings suggest that for students to have equitable access to education, they need access to food.

All interview participants believed that equity in access to free school meals is beneficial for all students. One participant mentioned, "it helps as a teacher when you know that your kids are fed." Another participant shared her thoughts regarding equity; she said, "I feel like public school is one of the places where kids should have equal rights to things... we say kids should have equal rights to education like you can't be educated if you are hungry." One foundation of public education is that it is free and accessible for all students.

Findings indicate that for the benefit of free school meals to be widespread, the meals needed to be accessible to everyone. During the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years, there was no required paperwork or eligibility; all children simply ate for free. All students had access

to food that could meet a physiological need and increase the likelihood of achieving the growth needs Maslow referenced, specifically academic achievement (Noltemeyer et al., 2021).

Interview participants described the program as “easy,” “convenient,” and “straightforward.”

Limitations

Several limitations to this study must be noted. The researcher recruited participants for this study from one school district. While participants represented six of the ten schools included in the study, not all schools in the district were represented. Due to only interviewing eight parents, the experiences shared may not be generalizable to all families. Additionally, the families represented in the study came from food-secure households which could impact the generalizability of the study.

In addition, the researcher is a school counselor and works directly with students experiencing food insecurity daily. The researcher also has children that attend the schools involved in the study. The researcher used active listening and refrained from interference throughout the conversation to remain objective during the recruitment process and the interviews with participants. Personal feelings were not shared regarding access to free school meals; however, the researcher's beliefs could potentially be assumed by participants due to the desire to research this topic and the professional role held as a school counselor. To help limit bias in the interpretation of the data received, each interview participant was asked to review and approve the transcription of their interview, and a secondary coder was utilized to provide an unbiased analysis.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Feasibility

As a first recommendation, school districts could take a serious look at the Community Eligibility Program (CEP) and the feasibility of participation if eligible. According to Hecht et al. (2022), before the COVID-19 pandemic, only two-thirds of all CEP-eligible schools were participating in the program. Starting with enrollment in federal programs that offer universal free meals to students would likely address part of the concern. Inevitably, many schools will not qualify for CEP due to an identified student percentage (ISP) lower than the 40% threshold set by the government (Hecht et al., 2020; USDA, n.d.).

If CEP is not a realistic option for a school district, a second recommendation would be a thorough budget audit to see if existing funding could be used to supplement the funding needed for this expense. Further examination of the California Universal Meals Program's structure and funding could prove useful in advocating for state funds, as California's program utilizes a combination of CEP and state funding to provide universal free school meals statewide (CDE, 2023). Likewise, a review of New York City's Lunch 4 Learning Campaign could provide insight into the use of community partnerships to fund free school meals for all students (Lunch 4 Learning, 2017).

Finally, advocacy efforts through state and local education associations could be pursued to encourage state legislators to consider the feasibility of allocating state funding to address the need for universal free school meals. Education associations often advocate for the needs of students at the state and local levels and can be utilized by school districts as a resource for advocacy. As part of the researcher's advocacy efforts, a deliverable (Appendix E) has been created and will be disseminated to stakeholders within the school district and to state legislators.

Fees

Two participants in the study mentioned the fees associated with making payments to their student's cafeteria account. The school district uses an online portal for storing cafeteria payments and purchases. Through online payment portals, parents can add money to their student's account by cash or check without a fee, but when making credit card payments online, a fee is added to the transaction. Additionally, one participant in the study noted the app was not always reliable. Sometimes, her daughters would try to purchase meals, but the money would not be available. It would be worth looking into the fees associated with the online portals used for cafeteria payment storage and purchases, to determine if it is the best resource for the school district to use or if a better option is available.

Recommendations for Further Study

Due to the limited number of participants in this study, it is recommended that this topic be studied in greater depth to determine the broader generalizability of this experience to the public. Nationwide, all families experienced access to free school meals beginning in March 2020; further study with larger populations will provide necessary insight to determine the feasibility of creating a long-term, sustainable option for school districts and states. Districts and states already providing free meals for all students could be studied to examine their approach and programs' replicability and effectiveness in decreasing familial stress and increasing school meal participation rates.

An additional recommendation for further study is on the stress experienced by children due to paying for school meals. One participant mentioned students' embarrassment when bringing home low balance and negative balance notification letters to their parents. Likewise, students can feel embarrassment and anxiety over needing to ask for resources from the school

counselor or from the stigma of using the free and reduced meal benefit in front of their peers. Having a greater understanding of the impact that access to free meals has on all students is essential for determining if the pursuit of universal free meals is worthwhile for all school districts.

Conclusion

Educators have the unique opportunity to transform the lives of students and families; understanding the widespread impact of poverty and food insecurity is an essential first step (Budge & Parrett, 2018). Access to free meals at school benefits all students, particularly those experiencing or on the verge of experiencing food insecurity (Gunderson et al., 2011; Kinsey et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2019). The current identification system that includes applications and income eligibility thresholds is flawed, often eliminating families in need whose income is just above the eligibility threshold or who fail to return the required paperwork needed to access the benefit. Removing barriers to access creates an environment in which students can thrive emotionally, socially, and academically, knowing their basic physiological needs of food and water are met inside their school doors. Providing access to free meals to all students helps minimize the stigma associated with food insecurity and benefits families across all socioeconomic backgrounds.

President Lyndon B. Johnson stated in his 1964 State of the Union Address, “unfortunately, many Americans live on the outskirts of hope – some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both. Our task is to help replace despair with opportunity” (The American Presidency Project, n.d.). Access to free school meals for all students provides an avenue for school districts and state governments to directly impact the needs of all students.

References

- Anderson, P. M., Butcher, K. F., Hoynes, H. W., & Whitemore Schanzenbach, D. (2016). Symposium: Food insecurity among children in the United States beyond income: What else predicts very low food security among children? *Southern Economic Journal*, 82(4), 1078–1105. <http://doi.org/10.1002/soej.12079>
- Andreyeva, T., & Sun, X. (2021). Universal school meals in the US: What can we learn from the Community Eligibility Provision? *Nutrients*, 13(8).
- Bartfeld, J. S., Berger, L., Men, F., & Chen, Y. (2019). Access to school breakfast program is associated with higher attendance and test scores among elementary school students. *The Journal of Nutrition*, 149(2), 336-343. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jn/nxy267>
- Bartfeld, J., & Dunifon, R. (2006). State-level predictors of food insecurity among households with children. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 25(4), 921-942. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30162768>
- Beegle, D. M. (2007). *See poverty...Be the difference! Discover the missing pieces for helping people move out of poverty*. Tigard, OR: Communication Across Barriers.
- Berge, J. M., Fertig, A. R., Trofholz, A., Neumark-Sztainer, D., Rogers, E., & Loth, K. (2020). Associations between parental stress, parent feeding practices, and child eating behaviors within the context of food insecurity. *Preventative Medicine Reports*, 19, 1-7. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2020.101146>
- Bernard, R., Hammarlund, R., Bouquet, M., Ojewole, T., Kirby, D., Grizzaffi, J., & McMahon, P. (2018). Parent and child reports of food insecurity and mental health: Divergent perspectives. *Ochsner Journal*, 18(4), 318-325. <http://doi.org/10.31486/toj.18.0037>

- Budge, K. & Parrett, W. (2018). *Disrupting poverty: Five powerful classroom practices*.
Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- California Department of Education. (2023). *California Universal Meals*.
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/sn/cauniversalmeals.asp>
- California Legislative Information. (2021). *AB-130 Education finance: education omnibus budget trailer bill*.
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB130
- Cohen, J. F. W., Polacsek, M., Hecht, C. E., Hecht, K., Read, M., Olarte, D. A., Patel, A. I., Schwartz, M. B., Turner, L., Zuercher, M., Gosliner, W., & Ritchie, L. D. (2022).
Implementation of universal school meals during COVID-19 and beyond: Challenges and benefits for school meals programs in Maine. *Nutrients*, 14(19).
<https://doi.org/10.3390/nu14194031>
- Cohen, J. F. W., Hecht, A. A., McLoughlin, G. M., Turner, L., & Schwartz, M. B. (2021).
Universal school meals and associations with student participation, attendance, academic performance, diet quality, food security, and Body Mass Index: A systematic review. *Nutrients*, 13(3), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu13030911>
- Coleman-Jensen, A. J. (2010). U.S. food insecurity status: Toward a refined definition. *Social Indicators Research*, 95(2), 215-230. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-009-9455-4>
- Community Food Advocates. (2022). *Community Food Advocates*.
<https://www.communityfoodadvocatesnyc.org/>
- Fang, D., Thomsen, M. R., & Nayga, R. M. (2021). The association between food insecurity and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *BMC Public Health*, 21(607).
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-10631-0>

- Feeding America. (2023). *Feeding America*. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/>
- Fiese, B. H., Gundersen, C., Koester, B., & Washington, L. (2011). Household food insecurity serious concerns for child development. *Social Policy Report*, 25(3).
- Gee, K., & Asim, M. (n.d.). *Parenting aggravation associated with food insecurity impacts children's behavior and development*. Center for Poverty & Inequality Research. <https://poverty.ucdavis.edu/post/parenting-aggravation-associated-food-insecurity-impacts-childrens-behavior-and-development#:~:text=Parents%20struggling%20with%20food%20insecurity,the%20behavior%20of%20their%20children>.
- Gordanier, J., Ozturk, O., Williams, B., & Zhan, C. (2020). Free lunch for all! The effect of the Community Eligibility Provision on academic outcomes. *Economics of Education Review*, 77. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2020.101999>
- Gregory, C. A. & Coleman-Jensen, A. (2013). Do high food prices increase food insecurity in the United States? *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*, 35(4), 679-707. <http://doi.org/10.1093/aep/ppt024>
- Gunderson, C., Engelhard, E., & Waxman, E. (2014). "Map the Meal Gap": Exploring food insecurity at the local level. *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*, 36(3), 373-386. <http://doi.org/10.1093/aep/ppu018>
- Gunderson, C., Kreider, B., & Pepper, J. (2011). The economics of food insecurity in the United States. *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*, 33(3), 281-303. <http://doi.org/10.1093/aep/ppr022>
- Gundersen, C. & Ziliak, J. P. (2014). Childhood food insecurity in the U.S.: Trends, causes, and policy options. *The Future of Children*, 1-19.

- Hecht, A. A., Stuart, E. A., & Pollack Porter, K. M. (2022). Factors associated with universal free school meal provision adoption among US public schools. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition & Dietetics*, 122(1), 49-64.
- Hecht, A. A., Pollack Porter, K. M., & Turner, L. (2020). Impact of the Community Eligibility Provision of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act on student nutrition, behavior, and academic outcomes: 2011-2019. *American Journal of Public Health*, 110(9), 1405-1410. <http://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305743>
- Hughes, M. (2018). Poverty as an Adverse Childhood Experience. *North Carolina Medical Journal*, 79(2), 124-126.
- Hunger and Health. (2022). *SNAP-eligible households*. <https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/explore-our-work/programs-target-populations/snap-eligible-households/>
- Katz, B. N., Soldavini, J., Grover, K., Jilcott Pitts, S., Martin, S. L., Thayer, L., Ammerman, A. S., & Lane, H. G. (2022). “Let’s use this mess to our advantage”: Calls to action to optimize school nutrition program beyond the pandemic. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(13).
- Kinsey, E. W., Hecht, A. A., Dunn, C. G., Levi, R., Read, M. A., Smith, C., Niesen, P., Seligman, H. K., & Hager, E. R. (2020). School closures during COVID-19: Opportunities for innovation in meal service. *American Journal of Public Health*, 110(11), 1635–1643. <http://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305875>
- Kleinman, R. E., Hall, S., Green, H., Korzec-Ramirez, D., Patton, K., Pagano, M. E., & Murphy, J. M. (2002). Diet, breakfast, and academic performance in children. *Annals of Nutrition & Metabolism*, 46, 24-30.

- Kotchick, B. A., Whitsett, D., & Sherman, M. F. (2021). Food insecurity and adolescent psychosocial adjustment: Indirect pathways through caregiver adjustment and caregiver-adolescent relationship quality. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 50, 89-102.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-020-01322-x>
- Landers, P. (2007). The food stamp program: History, nutrition education, and impact. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 107(11), 1945-1951.
- Landry, A., & Simmons, J. (2022). Perceptions of implementation of universal free meals in the National School Lunch. *School Nutrition Association*, 46(1).
- Lunch 4 Learning. (2017). *Building on the foundation of universal free school lunch*.
<https://www.lunch4learningnyc.org>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdale, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Moss, K., Dawson, L., Long, M., Kates, J., Musumeci, M., Cubanski, J., & Pollitz, K. (2020). The Families First Coronavirus Response Act: Summary of key provisions. *Kaiser Family Foundation*. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-families-first-coronavirus-response-act-summary-of-key-provisions/>
- Mutch, C., & Peung, S. (2021). ‘Maslow before Bloom’: Implementing a caring pedagogy during Covid-19. *New Zealand Journal of Teachers’ Work*, (18)2, 69-90.
- Mykerezzi, E., & Mills, B. (2010). The impact of food stamp program participation on household food insecurity. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 92(5), 1379-1391.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40931093>

- Nagata, J. M., Seligman, H. K., & Weiser, S. D. (2021). Perspective: The convergence of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and food insecurity in the United States. *Advanced Nutrition, 12*, 287–290. <https://doi.org/10.1093/advances/nmaa126>
- National Education Association. (2015). *Facts about child nutrition*. <http://www.nea.org/home/39282.htm>
- Noltemeyer, A., Bush, K., Patton, J., & Bergen D. (2012). The relationship among deficiency needs: An empirical investigation of Maslow's theory. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*(9), 1862-1867.
- Noltemeyer, A., James, A. G., Bush, K., Bergen, D., Barrios, V., & Patton, J. (2021). The relationship between deficiency needs and growth needs: The continuing investigation of Maslow's theory. *Child & Youth Services, 42*(1), p. 24-42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2020.181558>
- Perez-Escamilla, R., & Pinheiro de Toledo Vianna, R. (2012). Food insecurity and the behavioral and intellectual development of children: A review of the evidence. *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk, 3*(1).
- Ralston, K., Newman, C., Clauson, A., Guthrie, J., & Buzby, J. (2008). The National School Lunch Program: Background, trends, and issues. *Economic Research Report, 61*.
- Ratcliffe, C., McKernan, S., & Zhang, S. (2011). How much does the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program reduce food insecurity? *American Journal of Agricultural Economics, 93*(4), 1082-1098. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41240383>
- Ribar, D. C., & Haldeman, L. A. (2013). Changes in meal participation, attendance, and test scores associated with the availability of universal free school breakfasts. *Social Service Review, 354*-385.

- Ruffini, K. (2022). Universal access to free school meals and student achievement: Evidence from the Community Eligibility Provision. *Journal of Human Resources*, 57(3).
- Schwartz, A. E., & Rothbart, M. W. (2020). Let them eat lunch: The impact of universal free meals on student performance. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 39(2), 376-410. <http://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22175>
- Second Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Tennessee. (2022). *Second Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Tennessee*. <http://netfoodbank.org/>
- Second Harvest Food Bank of Northeast Tennessee. (2021). *The local faces of hunger*. <http://netfoodbank.org/hunger/>
- Slack, K. S. & Yoon, J. (2005). Food hardship and child behavior problems among low-income children. *Social Service Review*, 79(3), 511-536.
- Taras, H. (2005). Nutrition and student performance at school. *The Journal of School Health*, 75(6), 199-213.
- The American Presidency Project. (n.d.). *Annual message to the Congress on the State of the Union*. UC Santa Barbara. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/annual-message-the-congress-the-state-the-union-25>
- TN Department of Education. (2022). *State report card*. <https://www.tn.gov/education/families/report-card>
- Turner, L., Guthrie, J. F., & Ralston, K. (2019). Community eligibility and other provisions for universal free meals at school: Impact on student breakfast and lunch participation in California public schools. *Translational Behavioral Medicine*, 9(5), 931-941. <http://doi.org/10.1093/tbm/ibz090>

UNICEF. (2021). *COVID-19 and school closures: One year of education disruption*.
<file:///C:/Users/PhilbrickS/Downloads/COVID19-and-school-closures-report.pdf>

United States Department of Agriculture. (2022). *Child nutrition programs: Income eligibility guidelines (2022-2023)*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/fr-021622>

United States Department of Agriculture. (n.d.). *Child nutrition programs: Community Eligibility Provision*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/community-eligibility-provision>

United States Department of Agriculture. (n.d.). *How to participate in summer meals*. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SFSP-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

United States Department of Agriculture. (n.d.). *National School Lunch Program*.
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp>

United States Department of Agriculture. (2020). *PL 116-127 - Families First Coronavirus Response Act*. Food and Nutrition Service. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pl-116-127>

United States Department of Agriculture. (n.d.). *Summer Food Service Program*.
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/summer-food-service-program>

United States Department of Agriculture. (n.d.). *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program>

United States Department of Agriculture. (2017). *The National School Lunch Program*.
<https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/NSLPFactSheet.pdf>

United States Department of Agriculture. (2017). *The School Breakfast Program*. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SBPfactsheet.pdf>

United States Department of Agriculture. (2021). *USDA issues pandemic flexibilities for schools and day care facilities through June 2022 to support safe reopening and healthy, nutritious meals*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/news-item/usda-007521>

United States Department of Health & Human Services. (2019). *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>

Weinfield, N., Mills, G., Borger, C., Gearing, M., Macaluso, T., Montaquila, J., & Zedlewski, S. 2014. *Hunger in America 2014: Food bank report prepared for Feeding America*.

<http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/hunger-in-america/>

World Health Organization. (2022). *Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)*.

https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Question Guide

Interview # -

Date/Time –

1. How did access to free food at school impact your family?
2. What impact did it have on the time you allocated for breakfast and packing lunches?
3. How did this impact your level of stress?
4. How frequently did your student(s) participate in daily school breakfasts?
5. How frequently did your student(s) participate in daily school lunches?
6. What is your level of satisfaction with program?
7. Do you think this program is beneficial?
8. Do you think this program is necessary?
9. What concerns do you have with the overall program implementation?
10. What has your experience been since the program has been removed?
11. How did your day to day change with access to free meals and now without?
12. Did you notice any changes in your kids?
13. Did you experience any anxiety?
14. Overall impression –
15. Is there anything else you want to share that we did not cover?
16. If applicable, have you noticed a difference here at school, as a teacher?

Appendix B

Participation Consent Form

Research Participant Informed Consent

Invitation to Participate:

You are invited to participate in a Milligan University-sponsored research study. This form is part of an “informed consent” process to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether or not to participate.

This research study is recruiting parents/guardians of students enrolled in the district schools to participate in this study. The expected duration for participation is 30 minutes.

This study is being conducted by Stacey Philbrick (Principal Investigator). The Principal Investigator is associated with Milligan as a graduate student. You may already know the researcher as a school counselor at a middle school within the district, but this study is separate from that role.

Study Title:

The impact of universal free school meals on families and schools during COVID-19

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this qualitative study will be to gather and analyze the experiences of families affected by the universal free meals offered through the MEALS Act and the COVID-19 Child Nutrition Response Act and to examine the intended and unintended impact of the program on families and schools.

Procedures:

Parent/Guardians: You will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with the Principal Investigator. The time commitment is approximately 30 minutes. Interviews will be recorded.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Any decision to not participate in this study would have no penalty or loss of benefits you would have otherwise been entitled to if you were not invited to participate. You may discontinue participation in this study at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in this Study:

Risks: There is minimal to no risk to participants. Participants may feel emotional discomfort when thinking about the impact of free meals for children or their experiences as a child.

Benefits: This research is intended to benefit the school system and the general public by expanding the understanding of how access to free breakfast and lunch impacts families and the school environment.

Privacy:

Your personally identifying information will be **maintained confidentially** and will not be used in association with any other research project. Your study-related research data will be used and reported as an aggregate only and will not be individually identifiable.

Research Participant’s Rights and Responsibilities:

As a research participant, the following rights and responsibilities apply:

- If applicable, significant new findings developed during this research, which may relate to your willingness to continue participation in the study, will be provided to you by the Principal Investigator during the course of the study.
- To withdraw from the research study while it is still in progress, contact the Principal Investigator to ensure the orderly termination of your participation.
- Contact the Principal Investigator and/or Milligan’s Institutional Review Board for questions about this research study or your rights and responsibilities.

Contacts:

Principal Investigator:

Stacey Philbrick, Graduate Student
srphilbrick@my.milligan.edu

Milligan Institutional Review Board:

IRB@milligan.edu

Faculty Advisor:

Dr. Mark Dula
medula@milligan.edu

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understand the Informed Consent information presented for participation in this research study. This study **requires** written consent. By **signing below**, I agree to participate in this research study.

Participant’s Name (Printed): _____

Participant’s Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix C

Principal Email

Good afternoon,

For those who do not know me, my name is Stacey Philbrick, and I am a school counselor at a middle school in your district. I am also a doctoral student at Milligan University and am beginning my research for my dissertation. As the Curriculum Division Reviewer mentioned, my study will focus on the impact of access to free school meals during COVID-19.

I am seeking parents of 4th-8th grade students to interview about their experience over the past three years. I have attached a flyer with the details of the study and my contact information. I would like to start by sending this information out through email and will send flyers home through teachers if the emails do not result in much participation.

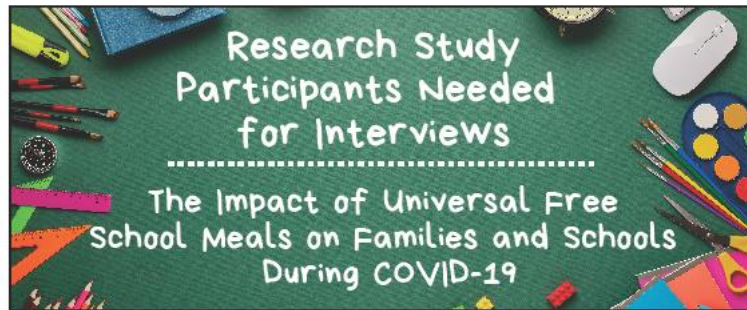
Would you please send my electronic flyer and information out to families through your 4th-8th grade teachers? Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns. I look forward to talking with the families of your students.

Sincerely,

Stacey Philbrick

Appendix D

Participant Recruitment Flyer



About the Study

.....

I am interviewing families that received free school meals during COVID-19, but no longer qualify to participate this school year. I am interested in the impact free school meals had on families and schools.

Criteria

.....

- Parent/Guardian of a JCS student in 4th-8th grade
- Not eligible for free meals this school year

The complex block includes a photo of a young girl writing, a title 'About the Study', a paragraph of text, a title 'Criteria', and a bulleted list. A white arrow points from the photo towards the criteria section.

Contact Information

.....

Stacey Philbrick
Graduate Student, Milligan University
srphilbrick@my.milligan.edu

Please email me if you are interested in participating. Thank you!



The contact information block is set against a red background and includes a title, contact details, and a closing sentence. To the right is a photo of children running.

Appendix E

Deliverable



RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS' PERSPECTIVES AS TEACHERS

"For a lot of kids in our system, you know, these meals are important, and they might be the only hot ones that they get that day."

"It helps as a teacher when you know that your kids are fed."

"When I think about my students like it was big...it really helped, and now it's a burden for a lot of people...Feed our kids, it's important to their education that their bellies are full."

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Participation in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)
- Thorough Budget Audit
- State Level Advocacy Efforts
- Review Fees Associated with Online Payment Portals

K-6 MEAL PARTICIPATION RATES

| School Year | Total Breakfast | Total Lunch | Total Meals Served | Anomaly Experienced |
|---------------------|-----------------|-------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| 2018-2019 | 715,817 | 4,01,000 | 479,091 | None |
| 2019-2020 | 261,331 | 432,481 | 671,802 | COVID-19 Closure |
| 2020-2021 | 238,718 | 394,708 | 633,456 | Quarantines and Virtual Learning |
| 2021-2022 | 379,635 | 508,300 | 817,931 | Universal Free Meals |
| Aug. 2022-Dec. 2022 | 117,504 | 194,311 | 312,815 | Half the school year |
| 2022-2023 Periodic | 259,868 | 389,022 | 624,839 | |

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS' THOUGHTS ON EQUITY

"We say kids should have equal rights to education, like you can't be educated if you are hungry."

"It put my children and their peers on an even playing field."

"Everyone can just eat, and that just seems like a basic human right, honestly, access to food."

"There are families out there that are proud, that do not want to ask for help, and that program provided them anonymity, that they were getting that help without having to ask for it."

PARTICIPATION RATES BY FREE, REDUCED, AND PAID STATUS

| School Year | Free % | Reduced % | Paid % | Anomaly Experienced |
|---------------------|--------|-----------|--------|----------------------------------|
| 2018-2019 | 96.40 | 3.44 | 0.74 | None |
| 2019-2020 | 76.18 | 26.18 | 50.00 | COVID-19 Closure |
| 2020-2021 | 71.20 | 28.44 | 55.04 | Quarantines and Virtual Learning |
| 2021-2022 | 73.82 | 26.04 | 50.30 | Universal Free Meals |
| Aug. 2022-Dec. 2022 | 69.74 | 60.78 | 52.88 | Half the school year |



VITA

STACEY PHILBRICK

Education: Ed.D. Educational Leadership, Milligan University, Johnson City,
Tennessee, 2023

M.A. Counseling, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City,
Tennessee, 2017

M.A. College Student Development, Appalachian State University,
Boone, North Carolina, 2009

B.A. Criminal Justice, Bluefield University, Bluefield, Virginia,
2004

Sheets Memorial Christian School, Lexington, North Carolina,
2000

Professional Experience: School Counselor, Liberty Bell Middle School, Johnson City,
Tennessee, 2017-Present

Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City,
Tennessee, 2015-2017

Academic Counselor and Adjunct Faculty, East Tennessee State
University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2009-2015

Area Coordinator and Director of Intramurals, Lenoir-Rhyne
University, Hickory, North Carolina, 2008-2009

Residential Manager and Director of Summer Recreation, Oak Hill
Academy, Mouth of Wilson, Virginia, 2007-2008

Social Worker, Department of Health and Human Resources,
Princeton, West Virginia, 2004-2006

Honors and Awards:

Dedication to the University/Department/Division, 2017

ETSU Featured Employee, 2015

Outstanding Academic Club Advisor, 2015