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Breakfast and Lunch Participation in Massachusetts Schools

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Breakfast and Lunch Participation in Massachusetts Schools



October 2012

MassBudget

Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center

Information.
Participation.
Democracy.



Project Overview

The Center for Social Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston (CSP), the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center (MassBudget), and the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI), with support from the Eos Foundation, established a research team to examine school food and related programs in Massachusetts. While the team developed an overview of all federally funded food programs in Massachusetts, the focus of our work was on school meal programs and several aspects of the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP).

The full project is composed of several individual pieces of research and analysis, most of which were primarily undertaken by one organization, but all of which benefitted from the expertise and active involvement of the entire team – and from very valuable input from outside experts.

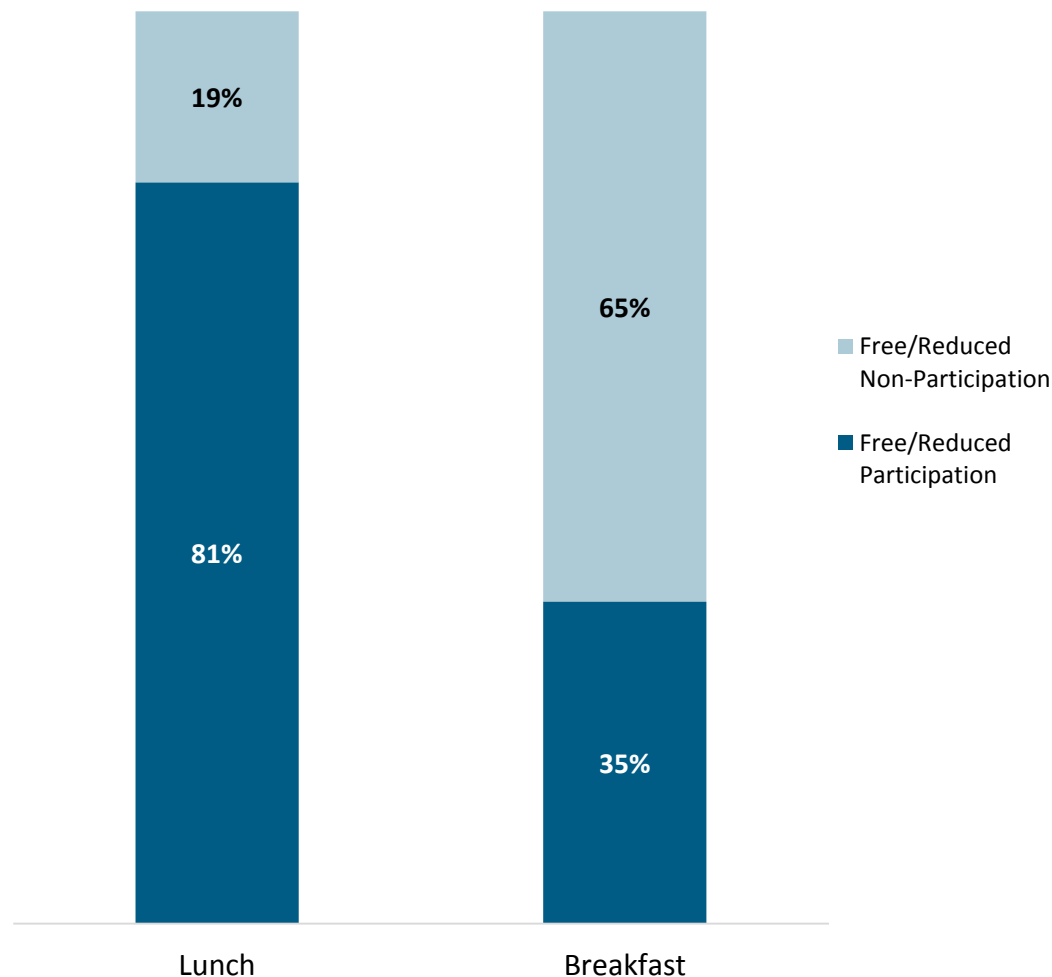
This chartpack, researched and written primarily by MassBudget, analyzes enrollment and participation levels for Massachusetts schools participating in the national school breakfast and lunch programs.

Overview of national school meal program eligibility:

Students living in households up to 130% of the federal poverty level (FPL) are eligible for free meals. Students living in households between 130% and 185% of FPL are eligible for reduced price meals (reduced price-enrolled students pay \$0.30 for breakfast and \$0.40 for lunch). Additionally, students are categorically eligible for free meals if they are homeless or if anyone in the household is on TAFDC or SNAP, meaning that many children between 130-200% of FPL still have access to free school meals. Further, children in foster care are categorically eligible for free meals even when living in households above 200% of FPL.

Many F/R Enrolled Students Do Not Eat School Meals

Free/reduced participation rates of students in attendance for Massachusetts public schools.
October 2011



On an average school day, significant numbers of Massachusetts students who could be receiving free or reduced price meals do not.

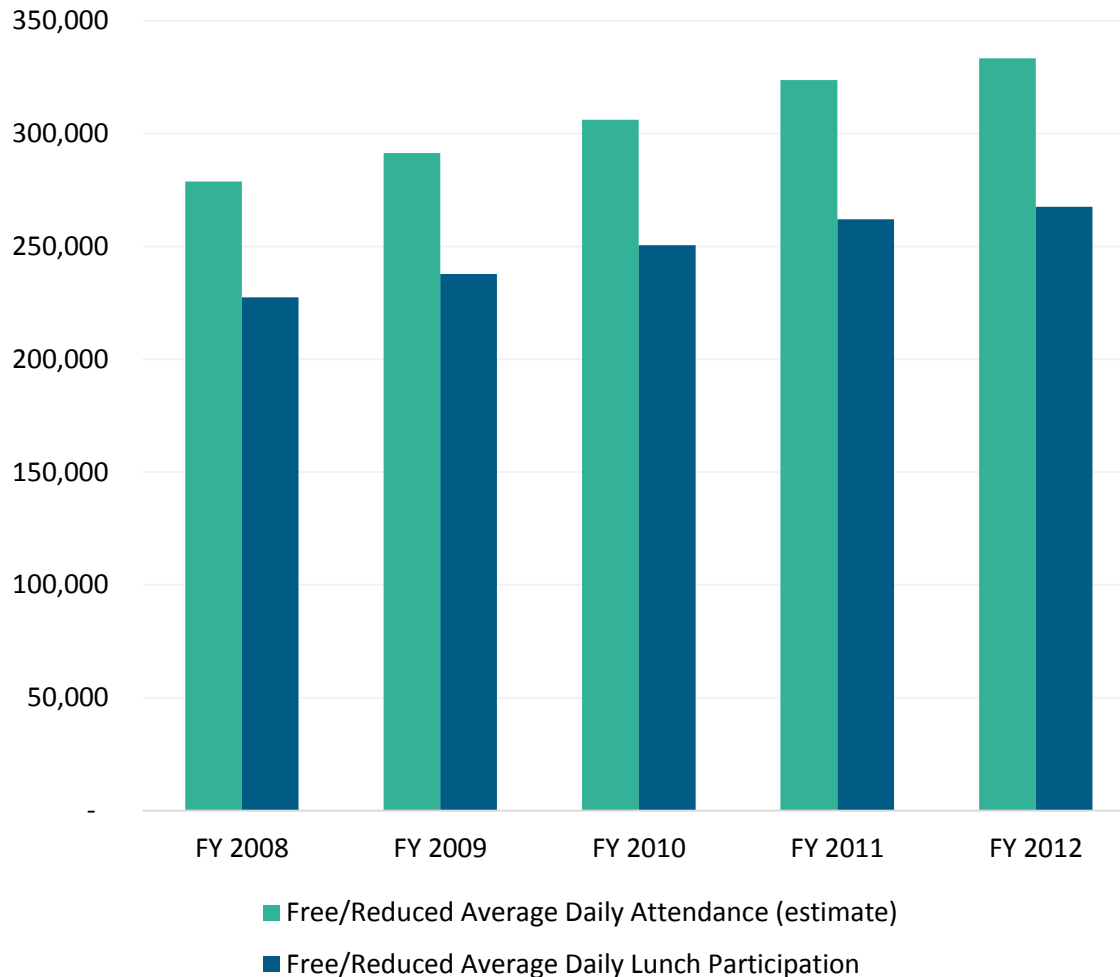
Currently, about 1 in 5 (or 19%) free or reduced-price eligible (F/R) students in Massachusetts public schools do not eat school lunch on a given school day.

Roughly 2 in 3 (or 65%) F/R students in Massachusetts public schools do not eat school breakfast on a given school day.

Note: All participation data in this chartpack include an attendance adjustment, so that they only consider free/reduced enrolled students who are in attendance on a given school day.

F/R Lunch Participation Has Remained Steady (~80%), FY 2008-2012

Participation rates of students in attendance for Massachusetts public schools. October 2011

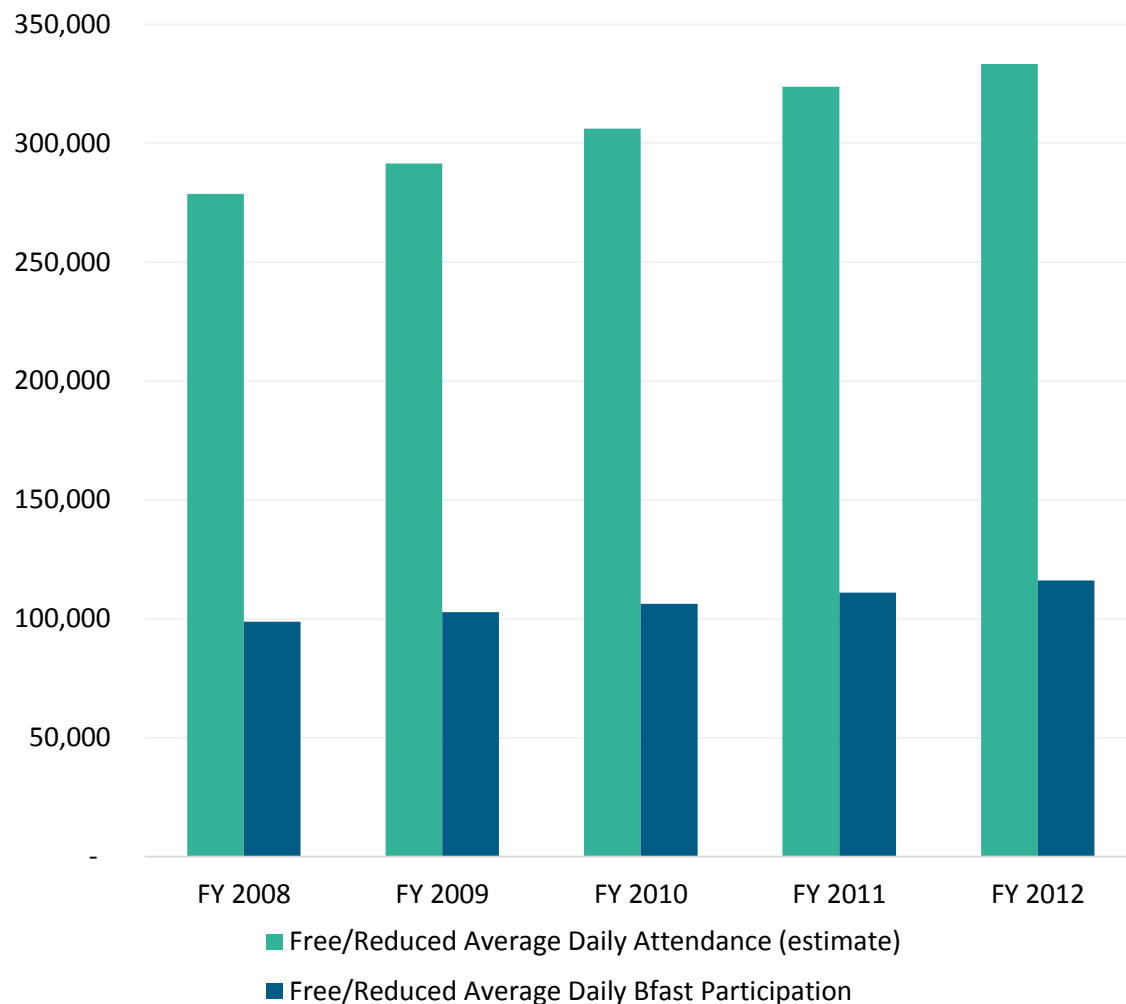


During each of the past five years, about 1 in 5 free or reduced enrolled students has not eaten school lunch.

This rate has remained quite steady, with average daily participation totals increasing slightly as enrollment increased during the recent recession.

Only One-Third of F/R Enrolled Students Eat School Breakfast, FY 2008-2012

Participation rates of students in attendance for Massachusetts public schools. October 2011



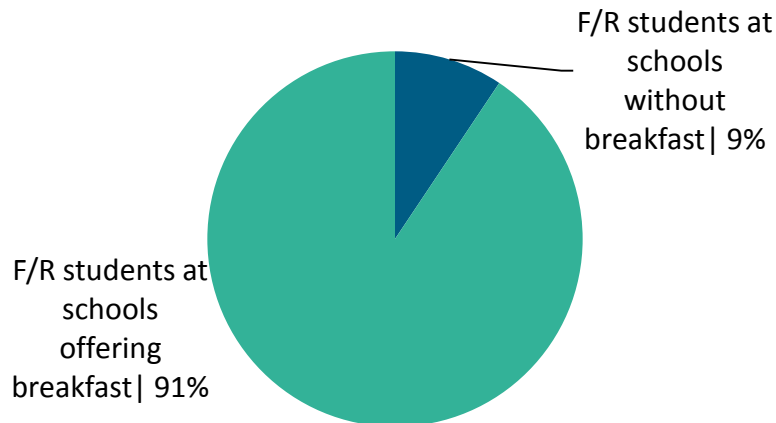
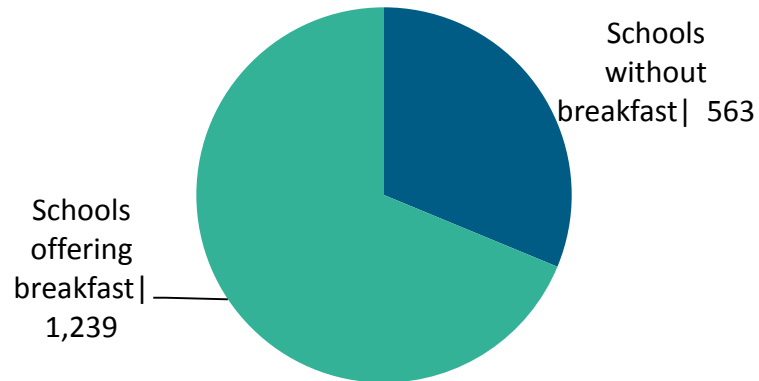
Similarly, breakfast participation rates have remained consistent over the past five years, albeit at a much lower level—about 35%. Roughly two in three F/R students are not eating school breakfast.

Again, as enrollment increased during the recent recession, so did average daily participation.

Data presented here include students attending schools that do not offer breakfast, an issue addressed in the next slide.

Deleting schools not offering breakfast from this analysis (and the F/R enrolled students that attend them), would only modestly increase breakfast participation; at schools offering breakfast, only 39% of F/R enrolled students ate school breakfast on an average day in FY 2012.

Many Schools Do Not Offer Breakfast



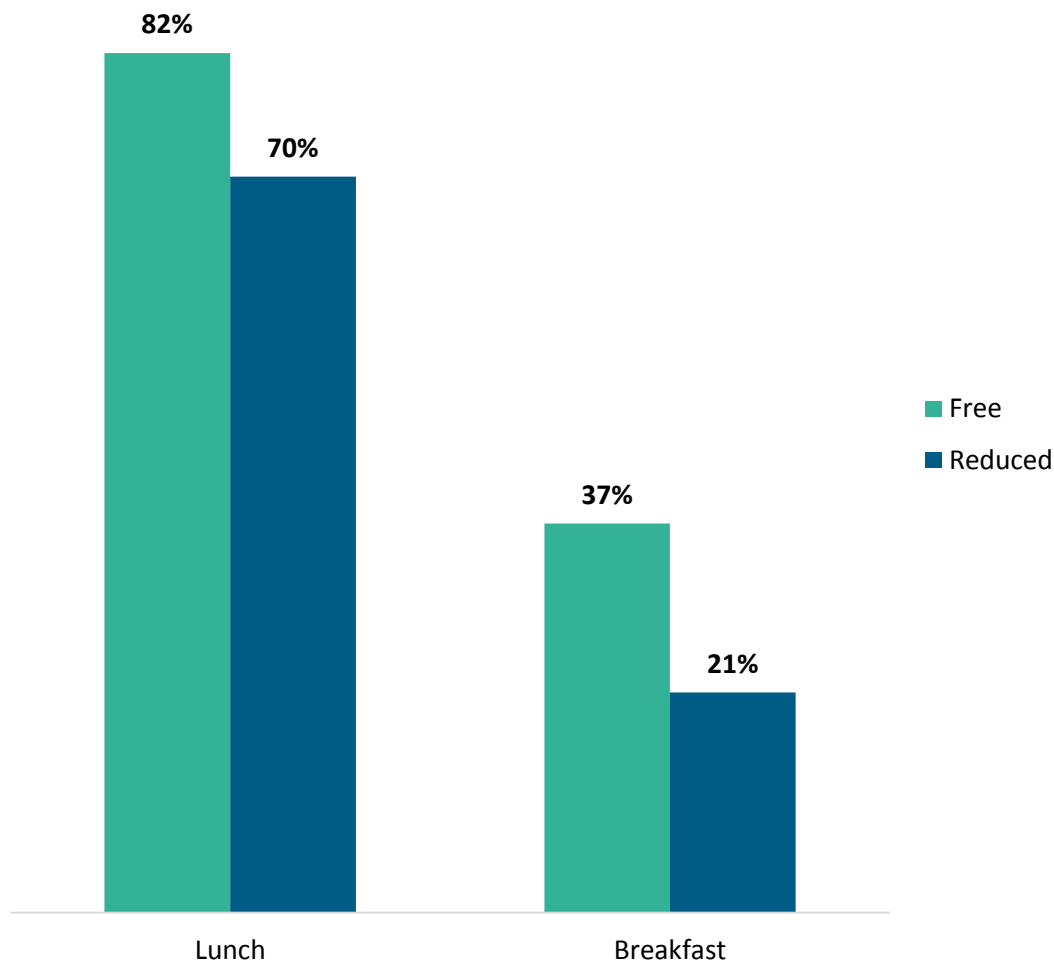
All schools participating in the National School Lunch Program are required to offer lunch, but many are not required to offer breakfast. Only those Massachusetts schools serving 40% or more of their lunches to free or reduced-enrolled students are required to offer breakfast, rendering many F/R students with no opportunity to eat school breakfast.

As of October 2011, 536 public schools (including charters)—31 percent of Massachusetts schools—do not offer breakfast.

33,007 free/reduced enrolled students — 9 percent of all F/R students—attend these schools, with no opportunity to eat school breakfast.

Reduced-Price Meal Participation is Significantly Lower than Free Meal Participation

Participation rates of students in attendance for Massachusetts public schools. October 2011



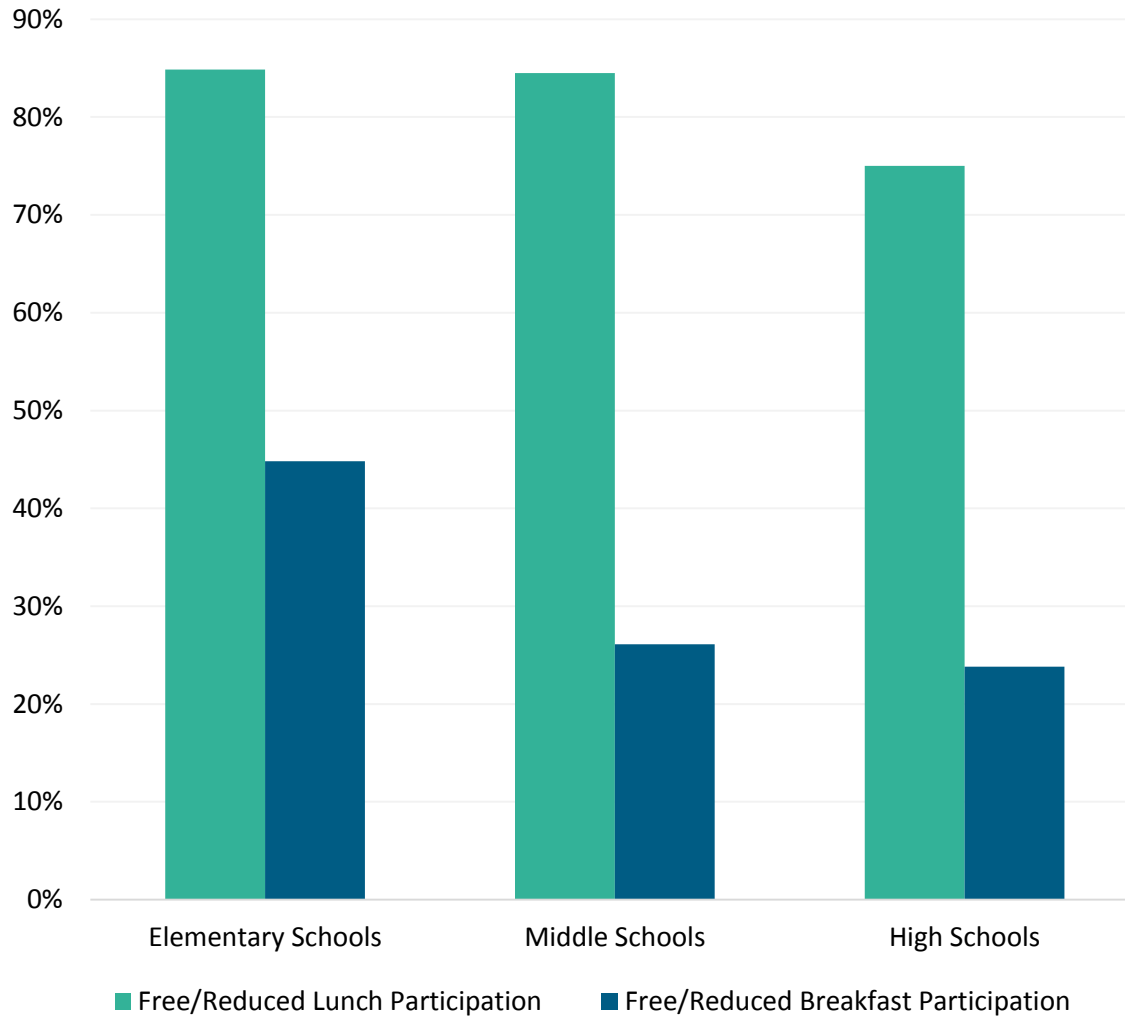
Thus far we've lumped together free-enrolled students with reduced-enrolled students to get a sense of macro trends for a broad grouping of low-income students. In this graph, by contrast, we disaggregate statewide free/reduced meal participation data by showing participation rates for free-enrolled students separate from participation for reduced-enrolled students.

Here we see that free-enrolled students are significantly more likely to eat school meals than reduced-enrolled students.

Perhaps most disturbingly, only about 1 in 5 reduced-enrolled students eats school breakfast on a given day.

Free/Reduced Meal Participation is Lower in High Schools

Participation rates of students in attendance for Massachusetts public schools. October 2011



Participation also varies by grade level, with high school students much less likely to eat school meals.

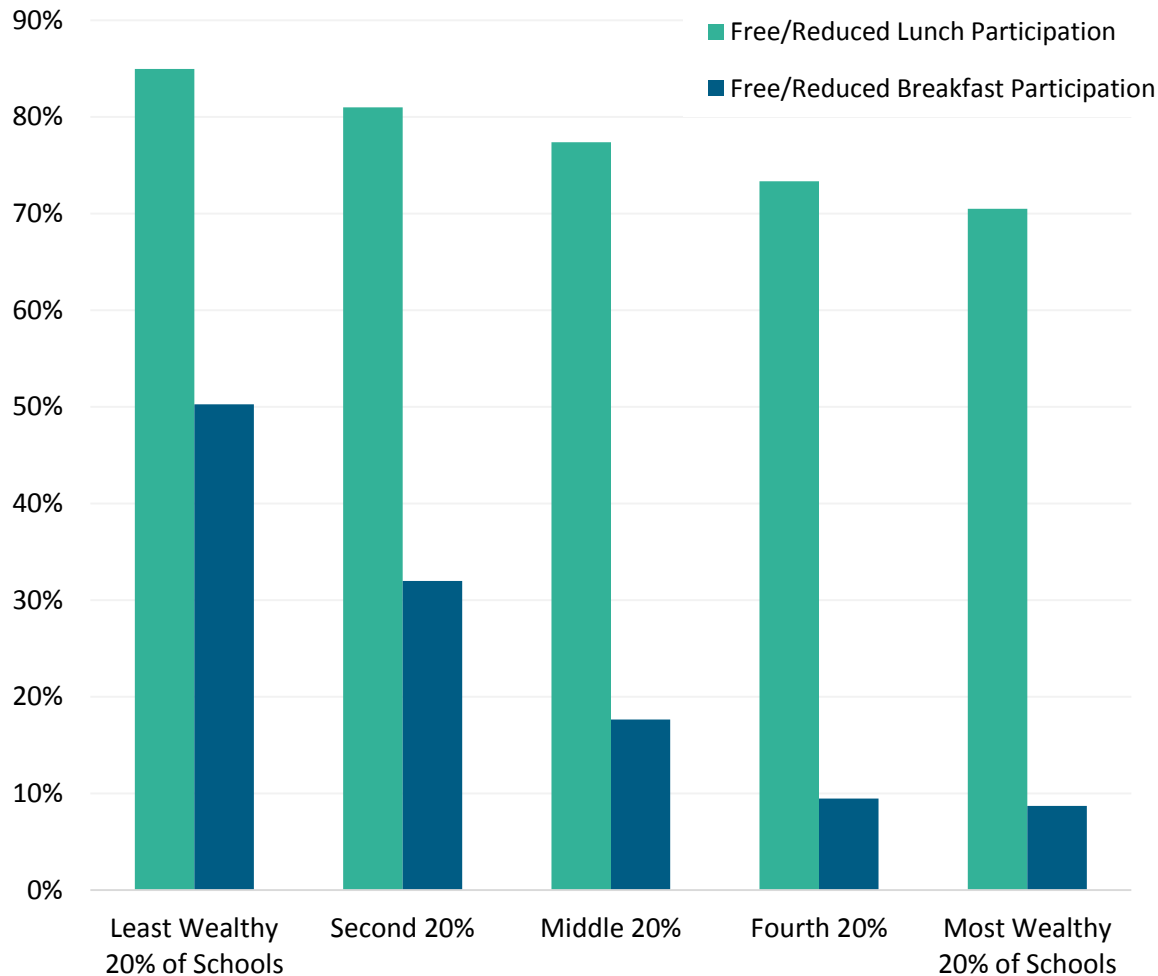
About 85% of elementary and middle school F/R students eat lunch on a given day, with high school participation dropping down to 75%.

For breakfast, participation drops off earlier, after elementary school. At 45%, elementary school breakfast participation is almost double middle school (26%) and high school (24%) participation.

Free/Reduced Student Meal Participation is Lower in Wealthier Schools

Schools clustered by percent of students enrolled for free or reduced meals. Equal number of students in each quintile. October 2011

Participation rates of students in attendance for Massachusetts public schools.



This graph disaggregates statewide data into wealth quintiles, clustering schools by their proportion of free/reduced enrolled students.

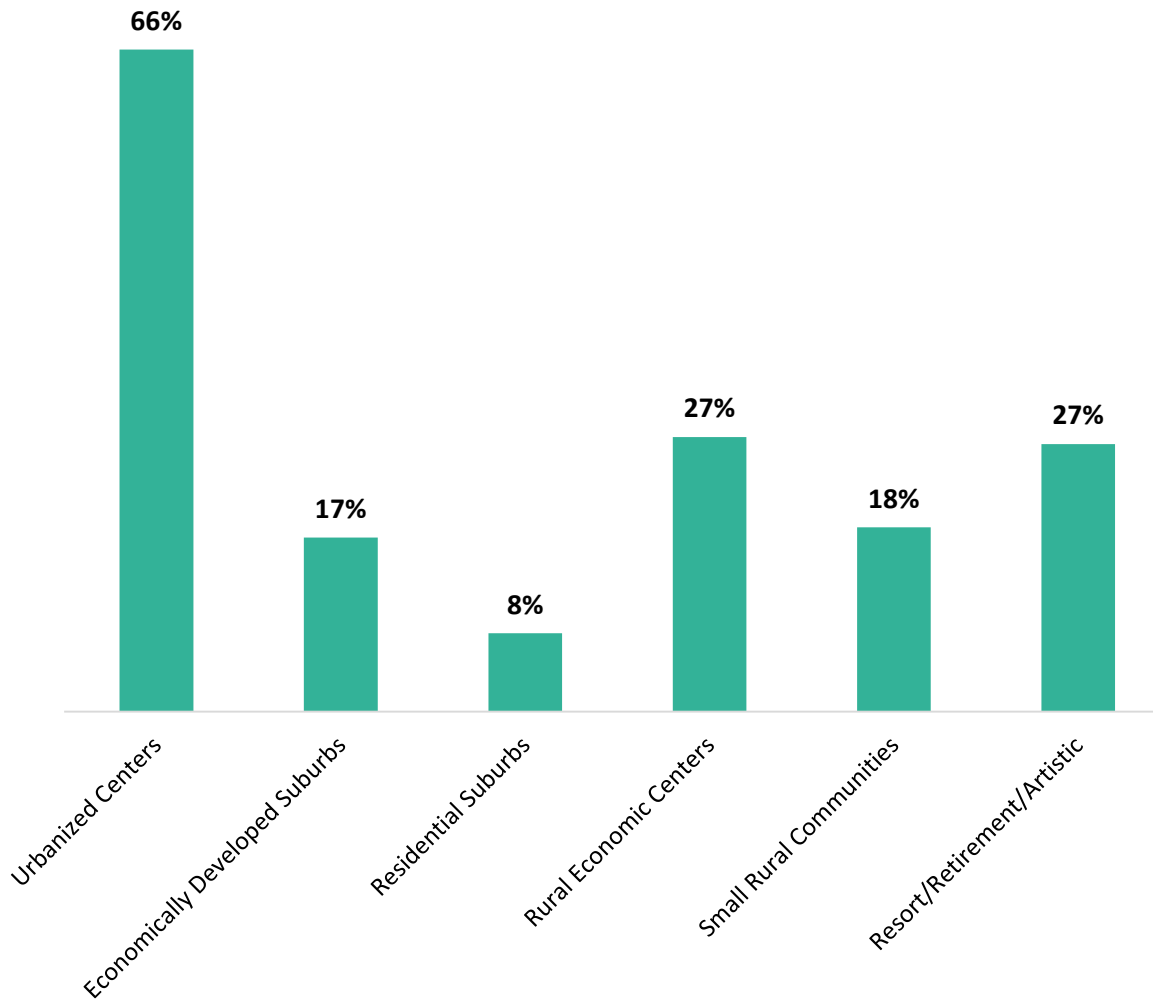
Here we see that F/R students are much more likely to eat school meals if they attend lower-wealth schools.

Also, breakfast participation rates drop off precipitously for F/R students attending wealthier schools. Again, most schools with F/R populations below 40% do not even offer breakfast.

It is worth noting that there are many fewer total F/R students attending schools in the wealthier quintiles. There are roughly 12,000 F/R students in the Most Wealthy 20%; 53,000 F/R students in the Middle 20%, and 159,000 in the Least Wealthy 20%.

Urbanized Centers Serve a Larger Proportion of Low-Income Students

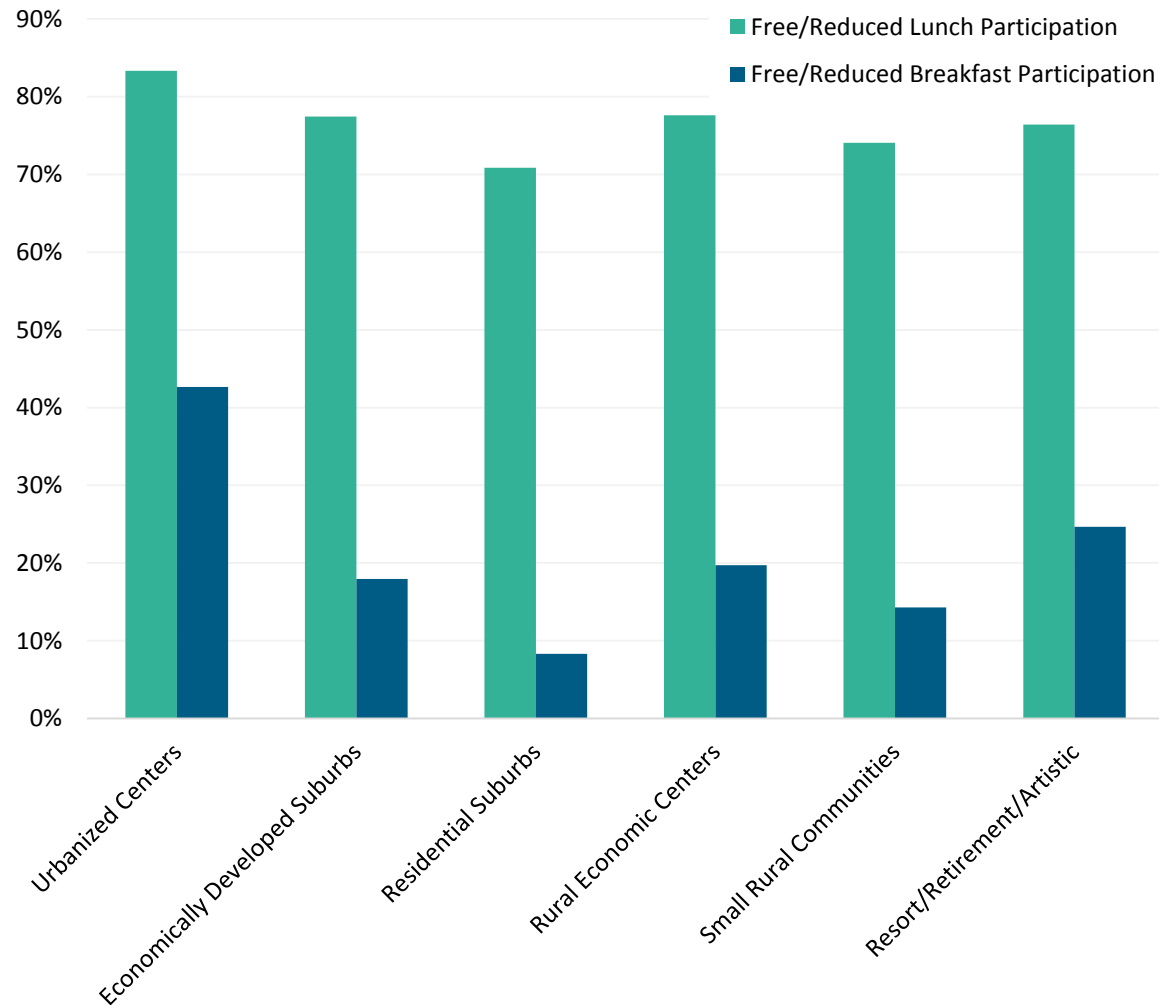
Percent of students enrolled for free or reduced meals , October 2011
Districts clustered by DESE-defined "Kind of Community"



Here we disaggregate statewide data by "Kind of Community," a designation created by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. At 66%, urbanized centers have by far the highest proportion of F/R enrolled students. In total, urban schools educate 240,000 F/R enrolled students, 68% of all F/R enrolled students statewide.

Urbanized Centers Have Highest Lunch and Breakfast Participation

Participation rates of F/R enrolled students in attendance for Massachusetts public schools. October 2011
Districts clustered by DESE-defined "Kind of Community".

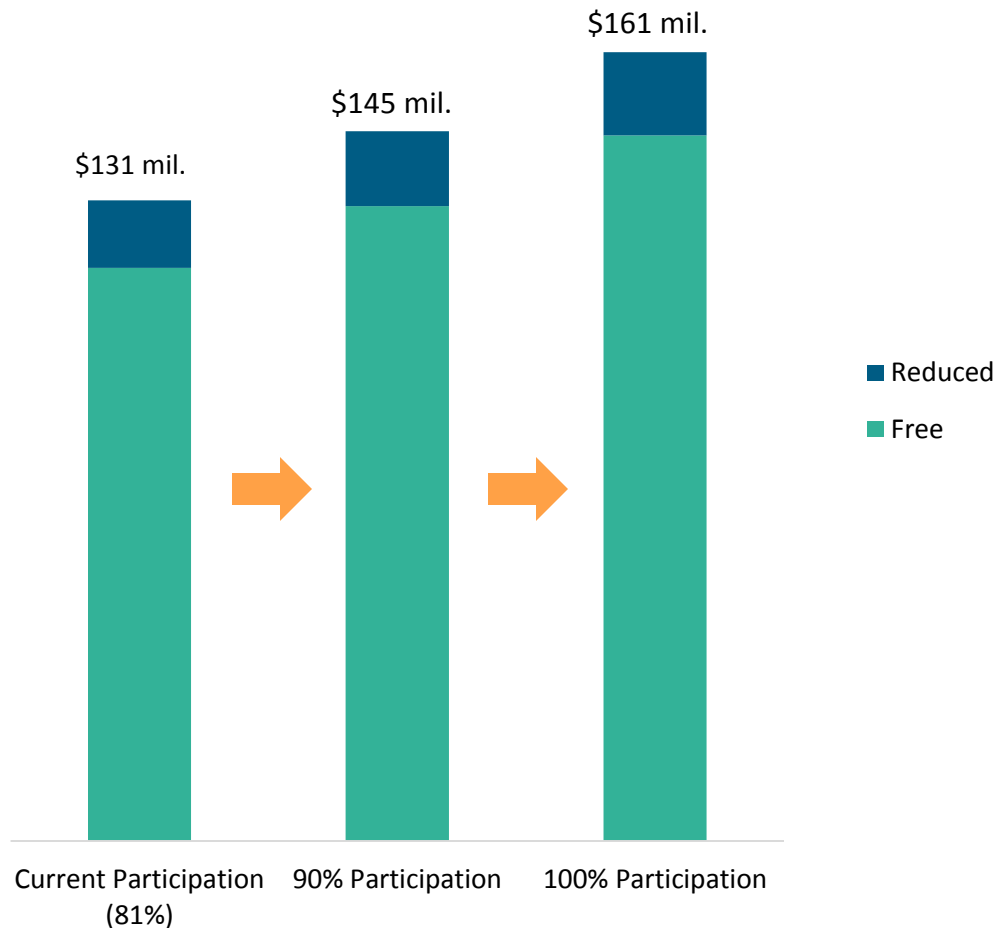


As we saw earlier, schools with higher proportions of F/R enrolled students also tend to experience higher meal participation rates. In this case, urbanized centers, which have much higher proportions of F/R students also experience higher participation, especially for breakfast.

By contrast, residential suburbs and small rural communities see the lowest participation rates.

Increasing Lunch Participation to 90% Would Generate \$14 Mil in Extra Reimbursements

Annual federal reimbursement estimates based on proportion of free and reduced enrolled students in attendance in Massachusetts public schools, October 2011.



By not generating higher participation rates, Massachusetts schools are forgoing the opportunity to feed more children *and* receive higher federal reimbursements.

Currently, about 1 in 5 (or 19%) of F/R students in Massachusetts public schools do not receive school lunch on a given school day.

If schools could decrease that rate to 1 in 10, maintaining the same proportion of free and reduced meals served, they would generate about \$14 million in additional federal reimbursements. Achieving full participation would generate an annual increase of roughly \$30 million.

Please note that lunch reimbursement estimates are somewhat conservative since they do not include an additional \$0.02 per lunch federal reimbursement for schools in which >60% of meals served were to F/R students.

As we'll see in the next graph, there's an even greater opportunity to increase reimbursements through boosting breakfast participation.

Increasing Bfast Participation to 70% Would Generate \$39 Mil in Extra Reimbursements

Annual state and federal reimbursement estimates based on proportion of free and reduced enrolled students in attendance in Massachusetts public schools, October 2011

Free and reduced reimbursement categories include separate reimbursement estimates for students in "severe need" schools.



Roughly 2 in 3 (or 65%) F/R students in Massachusetts public schools do not receive school breakfast on a given school day.

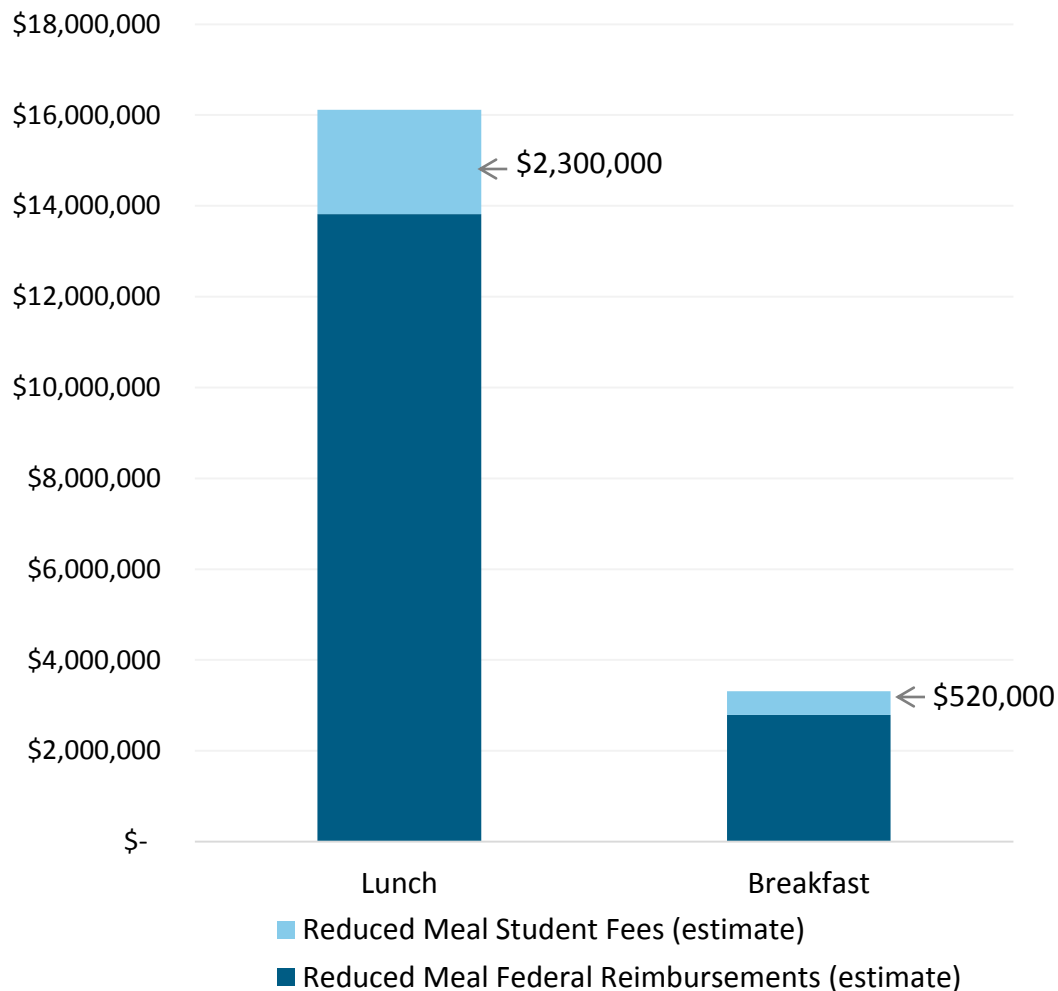
If schools could increase this participation rate to 70%, still below the current lunch participation rate of 81%, schools would yield an additional \$39 million in additional federal reimbursements.

In addition to feeding children, and saving low-income families money, increasing school meal participation rates would likely help increase academic achievement. Research has demonstrated a positive connection between regular low-income student participation in school meal programs academic achievement. A 2004 study by the Center for Social Policy at UMass Boston, for example, found that among schools with high percentages of FR-enrolled students, there was a strong correlation between higher breakfast participation and MCAS scores.

(<http://meals4kids.org/sites/default/files/MCAS%20Study.pdf>)

Waiving Reduced-Price Meal Fees Could Boost Meal Participation at Modest Cost

Estimated annual revenue to MA schools from reduced meals—federal reimbursements and student fees (\$0.40 per lunch and \$0.30 per breakfast)—based on Oct. 2011 participation rates

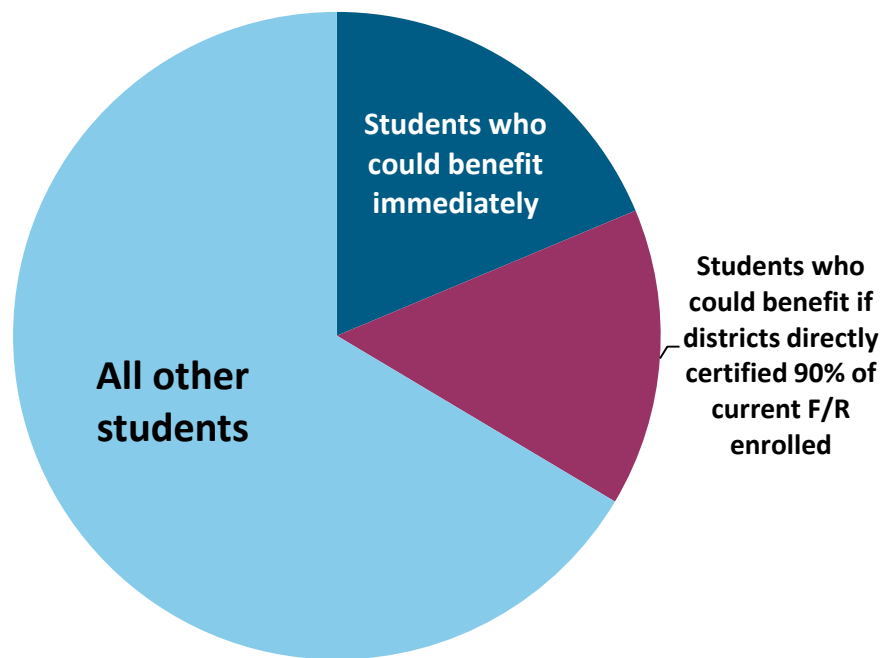


Schools in some parts of the country have chosen to waive reduced-price meal fees as a strategy for boosting reduced-price meal participation, which is significantly lower than free meal participation. Waiving these fees also saves low-income families money and helps ease the administrative burden of fee collection. If waiving these fees increases participation, however, schools would yield greater federal reimbursements, helping offset some increased costs associated with providing additional meals to these students. Additionally, for many schools, most likely those with larger F/R enrolled populations that have already reached economies of scale, it is possible that increased participation could be absorbed at little or no marginal cost.

Based on participation rates for reduced-eligible students in attendance on a given day, schools waiving these fees would only forego about \$2.3 million from lunch fees and \$520,000 from breakfast fees. It should be noted that since waiving fees would likely boost participation, these estimated costs should be considered as a floor, with the likely actual cost ultimately being somewhat greater. Again, though, these increased costs may be offset by administrative savings.

Schools could either decide to waive fees on their own, absorbing these costs themselves, or the state could implement a program that reimburses them for this foregone revenue.

Community Eligibility: Could Help One-Third of Kids in Mass



The graph above shows the number of kids who could benefit from Community Eligibility based on certain scenarios. “Students who could benefit immediately” (19%) are students attending districts for which more than 40% of their students are directly certified; “Students who could benefit if districts directly certified 90% of current F/R enrolled” (15%) simulates how many additional districts would pass the 40% threshold with 90% direct certification of current F/R students; “All other students” represent 66% of the statewide population. It is important to note that Community Eligibility is available to both schools and districts. For this analysis, we only look at districts. Individual schools above 40% direct certification but in districts below that threshold overall could still benefit from Community Eligibility but are not captured by this analysis.

The federal government has created a new option for states to expand access to free meals. This program, called Community Eligibility, allows schools or districts to provide free meals to all students if more than 40% of students are directly certified as eligible. Direct certification allows students receiving other specified benefits, such as SNAP or TANF, to be automatically enrolled in school meals programs.

For districts with more than 62% of the students directly certified for free meals, the federal program reimburses the full cost of all meals served in the school – the reimbursement is less if fewer students are directly certified.

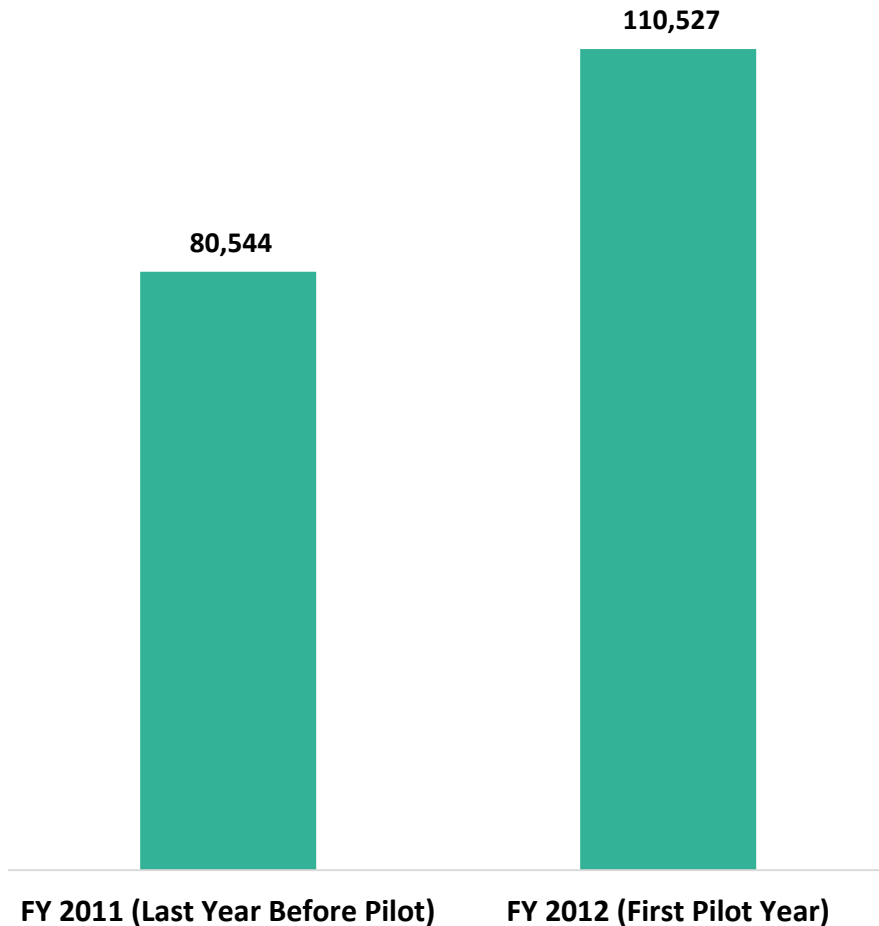
In participating districts, many more students would have access to free meals, there would be less stigma for those who are eligible now, and districts could save resources now used to check individual eligibility and collect money at meals.

For more information on this program:

http://frac.org/pdf/community_eligibility_helps_low_income_students_schools.pdf

Virtual Gateway Pilot: 37% Increase

Total students directly certified for NSLP for 34 Virtual Gateway pilot districts with available direct certification data—October 2011 and October 2012



To implement Community Eligibility effectively, districts need to directly certify as many students as possible. Massachusetts has implemented a pilot project that uses a state system called the Virtual Gateway to make it easier for districts to identify students enrolled in programs that make them automatically eligible for free meals. In districts that have been part of this pilot – which is now being extended to the whole state – there has been a 37% increase in the number of students directly certified.

There are a number of things the state could do to make further progress: make sure every eligible family is enrolled in SNAP; directly certify students based on MassHealth enrollment (which requires federal permission); make sure foster children are being directly certified; expanding “no wrong door” policies to make it easier for families to access all benefits for which they are eligible, and continuing to assist districts in using the virtual gateway.

Key Findings from Data Analysis

- On the average day, one in five students who could be receiving a free or reduced price lunch do not, and two out of three who could receive a free or reduced price breakfast do not.
- School breakfast participation is much lower than lunch participation, especially in districts with lower overall percentages of F/R enrolled students.
- Thirty-one percent of Massachusetts schools do not offer breakfast.
- Reduced price-eligible students are less likely to participate than those eligible for free meals.
- F/R meal participation is lower in high schools.
- F/R meal participation is lower in middle and upper income schools.
- Urbanized centers have the highest lunch and breakfast participation.
- Increasing F/R participation rates would yield significant increases in federal reimbursements:
 - Increasing lunch participation to 90% would generate an additional \$14 million.
 - Increasing breakfast participation to 70% would generate an additional \$39 million.
- Waiving reduced-price meal fees could improve meal participation at modest cost.
- The federal Community Eligibility option could help expand access to free meals, especially when combined with successful implementation of the state's Virtual Gateway system.

Food Assistance Programs in Massachusetts

