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June 2, 2021

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the 3 million members of the National Education Association and the 50 million students they educate and nurture, we urge you to co-sponsor the Universal School Meals Program Act of 2021, S. 1530, if you have not yet done so. This important legislation will ensure that all students, no matter their circumstances, have access to the free, nutritious school meals that will prepare them for learning and help keep them healthy.

The pandemic brought into sharp focus food insecurity in the United States, and it also demonstrated that our nation's school food service can provide meals to students in all communities, even under the most challenging circumstances. The Universal School Meals Program Act builds on this achievement by taking several steps to dramatically reduce child hunger, including providing free meals at school to every student and expanding access to summer meals.

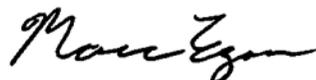
Members of the NEA include teachers, food-service workers, school counselors, and many other professionals in school communities across America. They know that learning requires concentration and energy, and they see what happens when students are hungry: Their classroom participation, performance, and behavior are negatively affected. We can fix this by providing healthy school meals to all students at no cost to them, ensuring that they are ready to learn, and helping them develop lifelong healthy eating habits.

Research bears out the benefits of the school meals program. According to the [Food Research & Action Center](#), students who participate in school breakfast programs attend school more regularly, behave better, and achieve more academically than those who do not. A recent study published in [JAMA Network Open](#) indicates that the nutritional quality of school food exceeds the nutritional quality of food students receive elsewhere, and improved greatly after the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010.

Many students need free or reduced-price school meals, but either do not participate or just barely miss qualifying. Some students qualify but do not participate because they are ashamed of their circumstances. Because universal school meals would include all students, no stigma would be attached to participation. A universal program would lift the burden of unpaid meal debt from both families and schools, and bring an end to local school district policies that often single students out for accumulated unpaid meal charges. Additionally, a universal program would relieve schools of complicated and burdensome paperwork, freeing up school food service workers to focus on their highest priority: preparing and serving healthy meals.

Although the USDA is extending waivers for the 2021-22 school year through which many schools have provided free breakfast and lunch to all students during the pandemic, these waivers are not a permanent solution to the crisis of child hunger. The bottom line is that America—the wealthiest nation in the world—should not means-test children for food. Please sign on as a cosponsor of the Universal School Meals Act of 2021 (S. 1530) if you have not, so that all students can receive healthy school meals at no charge to them, preparing them for growth and learning and cultivating healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Marc Egan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Marc" being more prominent than the last name "Egan".

Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations
National Education Association