



Written by [R. Cort Kirkwood](#) on August 22, 2011

## All Detroit Public School Students to Get Free Breakfast, Lunch, Snacks

Nearly 100,000 schoolchildren will receive the free meals regardless of income, thanks to a program administered by the federal Department of Agriculture. Detroit schools are participating, [they say](#), to eliminate the stigma associated with coming from a low-income household that requires such assistance.



### Program Details

The city [school system says](#) "the effort is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Community Eligibility Option Program, which will be piloted starting with the 2011-2012 school year." It adds, "Michigan was one of three states selected to participate in the pilot program. Schools and Districts in Michigan may participate if at least 40 percent of their students are entitled to public assistance."

"One of the primary goals of this program is to eliminate the stigma that students feel when they get a free lunch, as opposed to paying cash," explains [Mark Schrupp](#), the school system's chief operating officer. "Some students would skip important meals to avoid being identified as low-income. Now, all students will walk through a lunch line and not have to pay. Low-income students will not be easily identifiable and will be less likely to skip meals."

Aaron Levallee, a spokesman for USDA, [told the Detroit News](#) that "shame" is a major problem for school children who receive free lunches. "We've worked very hard to reduce the stigma," [Lavallee told the News](#), adding, "We're seeing a lot of working-class families who've had to turn to free school meals to feed their children. A lot of these kids are getting the bulk of their calories at school, so these programs are very important."

The change will add another 600,000 students to the dole, the [News reported](#). Although the [paper said](#) that enrollment in Detroit's schools is 65,800, the latest profile of the system, published in November 2009, [pegged enrollment](#) at 90,660.

Until now, "students from low-income households were required to fill out Meal Benefit Application forms, which collected valuable income data," the [school system said](#).

"Those forms are no longer required, but DPS is still requesting that families complete a Supplemental Student Services Survey to ensure that children, schools and the district will continue to receive millions of dollars in benefits and resources from the state and federal governments, as well as private grants."



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Thus, the change [will also lighten](#) the paperwork burden of schools.

### **Federal Program**

Detroit jumped on the free-lunch gravy train thanks to the [Community Eligibility Option Program](#), which provides the money under the [Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act](#), which President Obama signed into law in 2010. It will cost taxpayers \$4.5 billion.

[The USDA says](#) that “improving child nutrition” is the focal point of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act; but reducing the “stigma” of receiving help is, again, the prime mover for Detroit schools. “The stigma is real in Detroit,” the *News* reported, “where more than 78 percent of students qualify for free food.”

Free federal money may also be a factor.

The *News* also reported the staggering number of free lunches provided across Michigan. “More than 197 million school meals were served in the state in fiscal year 2010,” the [paper noted](#), adding,

Of those, more than 137 million were free or reduced cost, according to the state Department of Education.

In fiscal 2010, the federal government spent \$338 million on free and reduced school meals and snacks in Michigan, while the state spent more than \$30 million, according to preliminary state data.

The number of meals served in schools has risen. In 2007, about 179.5 million meals were served, with about 111.1 million free or at reduced costs.

Those figures mean that 69.5 percent of the school meals in the state were either free or at a reduced cost, an increase of 7.7 percent since 2007.

Other states [in the program](#) are Illinois, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

### **Ridicule**

One blogger in Michigan, [Nick Cheolas](#), [isn't happy](#) about the city's priorities. Given the city's crime wave, which included [25 shootings](#) in a single weekend, and a [child killed](#) by a stray bullet, Cheolas wonders why the government is spending \$4.5 billion in a “war on stigmas.”

“But seriously,” [he writes](#), “\$4.5 billion dollars to “reduce the stigma”?”

And we're reassured that “the stigma is real” by Mark Schrupp, DPS, chief operating office, because “more than 78 percent of students qualify for free food.” Which, what? Wouldn't this stigmatize the kids who can actually afford their own lunches? And doesn't this just stigmatize the whole damn city? We're also told that kids skip meals to avoid this stigma, and not, you know, because they're freaking school cafeteria meals. (The Free Press gets the win with the photo they selected to accompany their article). Apparently nobody at the USDA ever went to elementary school.

Cheolas is quite the wit, given that he is suffering with cancer. “I don't fight cancer because I fear death,” he writes at his profile. “I fight cancer because I fear [Mitch Albom writing about me](#) after death.”



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