

The Case Against Universal Free Lunch

By Max Eden

February 2022

Key Points

- Progressives argue that universal school lunch would reduce paperwork burdens, yielding administrative efficiency gains. But the true question moves us far beyond debates over welfare economics into the realm of morality.
- Universal free lunch would all but certainly engender a stigma against kids bringing brown lunch bags, crowding out parental food preparation.
- Beyond the taxpayer sticker shock, we should far more carefully consider the moral, social, and potentially biological costs of universal free school lunch.

Who should feed children? Parents or the government?

Before the pandemic, more than half of American public school students were eligible for free or reduced price school lunch (FRL).¹ Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) has proposed expanding the program to provide free breakfast, lunch, and dinner to every American public school student.² President Joe Biden is pushing a more modest reform, lowering the district-wide threshold for FRL “community eligibility” to cover a projected 9.7 million more students than it currently does—though this may prove an underestimate.³

There is a strong case for governmental provision of food to children whose parents can’t—or won’t—feed them. But that’s not the question at hand. The question is whether the government should feed children whose parents can provide them with the food they need. Conservatives have traditionally argued “no,” from a fiscal responsibility perspective.⁴ Progressives counter that universal school lunch would reduce paperwork burdens, yielding administrative efficiency gains.⁵ But the

true question moves us far beyond debates over welfare economics into the realm of morality.

Progressives realize this. Hence, their main argument for universal free lunch is that serving all students every meal will fight “stigma.”⁶ They note that kids who get free lunch sometimes are made fun of—or “lunch shamed”—by kids who don’t.⁷ They posit that if every student were fed every meal by their school, then no one could get shamed this way.

Let’s grant, for the sake of argument, the dubious assumption that universal free lunch would actually mitigate the absolute amount of bullying—that kids wouldn’t just redistribute social anxiety and social aggression to other pretexts. Is this the only moral axis in play? Or is the exclusive emphasis on stigma a product of progressive policymaking’s poor imagination?

To expand our moral imagination, let’s look internationally. Schools in Switzerland largely do not provide lunch. Rather, students break for two hours midday and generally walk home to be fed by their parents.⁸ The sight of young children walking

through the streets by themselves is unremarkable in high-trust Swiss society. In low-trust American society, by contrast, it can provoke calls to the police.

Swiss parents like having their children come home for lunch, because, according to “primary data” acquired from speaking with Swiss citizens, parents abhor the thought of turning over their children all day to a governmental institution.⁹ On the other hand, American progressives undoubtedly equally abhor the notion that a parent could be expected to be at home during the workday to feed their child. Which attitude—that of Swiss parents or that of American progressives—is more conducive to a flourishing society? Although American policymakers tend to exhibit what Oren Cass has termed “economic piety”¹⁰—the assumption that economic indicators in general, and gross domestic product in particular, are the most important data points—others take a more robust set of factors into account. Economists who have done so rank Switzerland third, and the US 18th, on citizen happiness.¹¹

Parents have a primal drive to provide food for their children. But parents are also sensitive and responsive to the social pressures their children face.

But there is an inherent limitation in relying on aggregate data for fundamentally human questions, such as knowing what is best for human happiness. Primary data, or “lived experience,” as it’s sometimes called, is important to bring to bear as well. Based on my primary data, I suspect the Swiss have it more right; this is mainly because of my mother. She frequently told me that she took great joy every day preparing my breakfast and lunch. That struck me as natural and beautiful. Parents have a primal drive to provide food for their children. But parents are also sensitive and responsive to the social pressures their children face. Kids apply stigma to behaviors that go against norms.

Universal free lunch would all but certainly engender a stigma against kids bringing brown lunch bags, crowding out parental food preparation.

Would this really be good for parents? Or for children? Let’s expand our moral imagination even further.

For millennia, eating has been a partly sacramental act. Christians, Jews, and Muslims preface or close their meals with prayers reflecting on how God has ordered the natural world and how human affairs have been arranged to provide sustenance, for which—according to all faith traditions—gratitude should be felt. Gratitude, these traditions teach, does not come easily. It must be practiced.

When my mom was a teacher in the Cleveland Municipal School District, she was unnerved by the entitled attitude her elementary students took to the free school breakfasts consumed in her classroom (and not to mention by the massive food waste). So before they ate, she asked her students to say in unison: “Thank you, state of Ohio.”

She thought this was better than no expression of gratitude. And she was probably right. But it also struck me as creepy. When I was in high school, I couldn’t articulate why it struck me that way, but today I can. Any child naturally inclined to gratitude in the act of eating would not be reflecting on how the love and labor of their parents, working as units within society, brought that food to their plate. Rather, they must contemplate the state as provider. Such reflection must necessarily inform and transform a child’s moral worldview, with human consequences that will evade econometric analysis.

Let’s expand our moral imagination from consumption to production. Further centralizing and socializing how America feeds its schoolchildren will all but certainly lock in our reliance on factory-farmed livestock. Factory farming is a profound moral evil. One need only look at the abominable conditions animals are subjected to by Big Ag to realize this. As more Americans have realized, there has been a growing consumer movement toward organic and Certified Humane products. There has also been some political action. California, for example, recently passed a law requiring that pregnant pigs be provided enough space to

stand and turn around—a law that yielded histrionic headlines, such as “Bacon May Disappear in California.”¹²

I’d love to be proved wrong, but color me skeptical that Congress or the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) will demonstrate the political will to require providers for the low-cost school lunch programs to adopt high-cost Certified Humane standards. Rather, progress on this front seems more likely to come from decreasing regulatory burdens on small farmers (à la the proposed bipartisan PRIME Act)¹³ and further raising public consciousness—perhaps through direct classroom instruction. Unfortunately, the most likely outcome of universalizing free school lunch would be the expanding and cementing of our national commitment to feeding children based on systemic animal torture.

Against all this . . . what are the counterarguments? Even granting that stigma against students who receive free lunch is a widespread problem that could be addressed, one study found little evidence that it hurts academics.¹⁴ A literature review on the effects of the Community Eligibility Provision that Biden seeks to expand noted that of five studies on universal breakfast, “3 found no change in test scores and 2 found some improvements.” Among studies focusing specifically on Community Eligibility for lunch, “2 detected improvement in test scores for some subjects and age groups and the third detected no change.” The authors note that the positive effects were “relatively small” and “similar in magnitude to those seen when families receive other forms of income support, such as the earned income tax credit.”¹⁵ Why not, then, just allocate the additional money directly to parents (perhaps with a brochure documenting the horrors of factory farming and sustainability problems of monocrop agriculture)?

The strongest argument for spending additional money in the federal school lunch system is that school lunches are, reportedly, much healthier than food from the grocery store is. A recent study found that after the Obama administration’s school lunch overhaul, according to the American Heart Association’s (AHA) diet index,

Diet quality for foods from schools improved significantly. . . . By 2017–2018, food consumed at schools had the highest quality [according to the AHA], followed by food from grocery stores, other sources, worksites, and restaurants. . . . Findings were similar for [the USDA’s] Healthy Eating Index.¹⁶

School lunches are definitely nutritionally different. But whether for better or worse depends on whether the USDA and AHA are right or wrong in their dietary assumptions. It’s now a matter of well-documented record that the USDA’s original “food pyramid” was reworked against experts’ advice before publication to satisfy the food industry’s interests. Luise Light, the former USDA director of dietary guidance and nutrition education research, has exposed that

nutrition for the government is primarily a marketing tool to fuel growth in consumer food expenditures and demand for major food commodities: meat, dairy, eggs, wheat. It’s an economics lesson that has very little to do with our health and nutrition and everything to do with making sure that food expenditures continue to rise for all interests involved in the food industry.¹⁷

Maybe the USDA’s new guidelines truly are a product of disinterested science. But it took decades for the full story of the original version to be told. In the meantime, with children’s health at stake, it might be wise to not simply and categorically trust the science.

The AHA’s index is based on the hypothesis that saturated fats are bad and should be eschewed in favor of polyunsaturated fats from sources such as soybean oil.¹⁸ But the AHA’s hypothesis is not uncontroversial. It has been challenged from several angles, and some contend that the rise in consuming vegetable oil, which over the past century has gone from virtually zero to about a fifth of Americans’ caloric intake, has been a major driver of obesity, diabetes, and other chronic disease.¹⁹

A recent animal study found that soybean oil, which represents about 7 percent of American caloric intake, caused “a significant dysregulation of more than 100 hypothalamic genes including those involved in neurochemical and neuroendocrine pathways and metabolic and neurological disorders.” This finding, the authors note, “could have important public health ramifications.”²⁰ One ramification: The apparently most powerful argument in favor of universal school lunch may—in truth—be the most damning argument against it.

Although I’m certain that many respected nutritional scientists could present learned arguments disputing this, it strikes me as adequate information for parents and policymakers to conclude that the nutritional science isn’t fully “settled.”

The old saying goes: “There ain’t no such thing as a free lunch.” But libertarian and small-government opponents of universalizing school lunch have taken the admonition too literally. Beyond the taxpayer sticker shock, we should far more carefully consider the moral, social, and potentially biological costs of universal free school lunch.

About the Author

Max Eden is a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, where he focuses on education reform, specifically K–12 and early childhood education. Before rejoining AEI, he was a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

Notes

1. US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, “Number and Percentage of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch, by State: Selected Years, 2000–01 Through 2018–19,” https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_204.10.asp.
2. Sanders.Senate.gov, “NEWS: Sanders, Omar, Gillibrand, and Moore Seek to Expand and Make Permanent Universal School Meals,” press release, May 7, 2021, <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/press-releases/news-sanders-omar-gillibrand-and-moore-seek-to-expand-and-make-permanent-universal-school-meals/>.
3. Carmen Reinicke, “Biden Proposal Will Make Free School Lunch Available to 29 Million Children Every Summer,” CNBC, May 5, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/05/05/biden-plan-will-make-free-meals-available-to-children-every-summer.html>.
4. Daren Bakst and Jonathan Butcher, “Why Isn’t the School Meal Program Serving Only Those in Need?,” Heritage Foundation, May 14, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/agriculture/commentary/why-isnt-the-school-meal-program-serving-only-those-need>.
5. Children’s Defense Fund, “Why It’s Time to Think Universal School Meals for Our Children,” December 23, 2020, <https://www.childrensdefense.org/blog/universal-school-meals/>.
6. Amy Brown and Janna Bilski, “Fighting the Stigma of Free Lunch: Why Universal Free School Lunch Is Good for Students, Schools, and Families,” Ford Foundation, September 29, 2017, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/just-matters/just-matters/posts/fighting-the-stigma-of-free-lunch-why-universal-free-school-lunch-is-good-for-students-schools-and-families/>.
7. Crystal FitzSimons, “School Lunch Debt and Lunch Shaming Is a Problem That Needs a National Solution,” NBC News, October 16, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/school-lunch-debt-lunch-shaming-problem-needs-national-solution-ncna1066461>.
8. Stefanie Busse, “Local Swiss School and the Working Parent,” Swiss Education Consulting, June 26, 2016, <https://swisseducationconsulting.ch/local-school-and-the-working-parent/>.
9. In addition to the author’s conversations with Swiss nationals, Switzerland is known for laws and customs that reflect a distinctively different understanding of the relationship between the state and the citizens. See Sean Mowbray, “13 Unusual Laws in Switzerland the Swiss Don’t Even Know About,” Culture Trip, August 16, 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/switzerland/articles/13-weird-swiss-laws-you-should-know-about/>.
10. Oren Cass, “Economic Piety Is a Crisis for Workers,” *Atlantic*, November 27, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/11/emphasize-production-not-consumption/576625/>.
11. John F. Helliwell et al., *World Happiness Report 2021*, World Happiness Report, 2021, <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2021/>.
12. Associated Press, “Bacon May Disappear in California as New Animal Welfare Rules Take Effect,” *Today*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.today.com/food/bacon-may-disappear-california-new-animal-welfare-rules-take-effect-t227128>.
13. Carrie Stadheim, “PRIME Act Would Encourage Local Meat Sales at Custom Plants,” *Tri-State Livestock News*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.tsln.com/news/prime-act-would-encourage-local-meat-sales/>.

14. Baeksan Yu, Hyejung Lim, and Sean Kelly, “Does Receiving a School Free Lunch Lead to a Stigma Effect? Evidence from a Longitudinal Analysis in South Korea,” *Social Psychology of Education* 22 (March 19, 2019): 291–319, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11218-019-09485-7>.
15. Amelie A. Hecht, Keshia M. Pollack Porter, and Lindsey Turner, “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, no. 9 (September 2020): 1405–10, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7427252/#bib19>.
16. Junxiu Liu et al., “Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003–2018,” *JAMA Network Open* 4, no. 4 (April 12, 2021), <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2778453>.
17. Luise Light, “A Fatally Flawed Food Guide,” *Whale*, 2004, <http://www.whale.to/a/light.html>.
18. American Heart Association, “Polyunsaturated Fat,” June 1, 2015, <https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart/fats/polyunsaturated-fats>.
19. Gary Taube, “What If It’s All Been a Big Fat Lie?,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 7, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/07/magazine/what-if-it-s-all-been-a-big-fat-lie.html>; Catherine Shanahan, *Deep Nutrition: Why Your Genes Need Traditional Food* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2017); Sarah Rehkamp, “A Look at Calorie Sources in the American Diet,” US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, December 5, 2016, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2016/december/a-look-at-calorie-sources-in-the-american-diet/>; and Jeff Nobbs, “Death by Vegetable Oil: What the Studies Say,” May 7, 2020, <https://www.jeffnobbs.com/posts/death-by-vegetable-oil-what-the-studies-say>.
20. Poonamjot Deol et al., “Dysregulation of Hypothalamic Gene Expression and the Oxytocinergic System by Soybean Oil Diets in Male Mice,” *Endocrinology* 161, no. 2 (February 2020), <https://academic.oup.com/endo/article/161/2/bqz044/5698148>.

© 2022 by the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. All rights reserved.

The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) educational organization and does not take institutional positions on any issues. The views expressed here are those of the author(s).