

Rothbart and Schwartz Universal Free Meals Project Executive Summary

TITLE: Does Universal Free School Meals Reduce Childhood Obesity?

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BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY:

This project investigates the effects of the rapidly spreading Universal Free Meals (UFM) policies, which eliminate fees for school meals for all students, regardless of income. Using a difference-in-difference design and longitudinal, student-, school- and district-level data, this research estimates the impacts of UFM on obesity and test scores, both overall and for a set of sociodemographic and organizational subgroups.

The National School Lunch and Breakfast Program, NSLP and SBP, respectively, provide free and low-cost meals daily to tens of millions of children in over 100,000 schools and childcare centers. The NSLP is the second largest food and nutrition assistance program in the United States, trailing only the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Traditionally, public schools certify student eligibility at the individual level, offering free meals to poor students (household income up to 130% of the federal poverty line), at a reduced price to other low-income students (household income up to 185%), and at a higher price to others. A growing number of schools and districts have adopted policies eliminating all lunch and breakfast fees, providing free school meals for all students, regardless of income, aiming to improve nutrition (i.e., reduce hunger and food insecurity) and health outcomes (especially reduce obesity).

The study is comprised of two papers. The first paper uses longitudinal student data from New York City public schools to explore the impact of UFM adopted at the school level under Provision 2 of the National School Lunch Act. Using unique student-level data on meal transactions, academic outcomes and student characteristics, the impact of UFM on school lunch participation and test performance is estimated. Secondary analyses use UFM as an instrumental variable to estimate the effect of school lunch participation, per se, on obesity and test scores.

The second paper uses district and school data for all of New York State to explore the impacts of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) that provides an avenue for districtwide UFM. Using new data on the prevalence of obesity for all New York State school districts and exploiting staggered rollout of UFM under CEP, the analysis is extended to the whole state, again exploring impacts on childhood obesity. The results from this study will help policymakers target expansions of UFM, and/or contract existing UFM coverage, by delivering credibly causal estimates of the consequences of UFM.

FINDINGS:

The results of the first paper show that UFM has positive effects on middle school students in NYC. UFM improves student academic achievement in middle schools, increases school lunch participation markedly, and may improve weight outcomes for those that would otherwise not

qualify for free school meals. The improvements in performance on English language arts and math achievement exams (as much as 0.083 and 0.059 standard deviation units for non-poor students) are quite large relative to the low cost of school meals compared to more intensive academic interventions. UFM increases participation in school lunch by roughly 11.0 percentage points (approximately one lunch every two school weeks) for non-poor students and 5.4 percentage points (approximately one lunch every four school weeks) for poor students. There is no effect on attendance rate, but some evidence that UFM improves weight outcomes, particularly among non-poor students.

The results of the second paper show that CEP increases participation in the school breakfast and school lunch programs, with positive consequences for student weight outcomes. CEP reduces rates of obesity and overweight among secondary school students by 2.4 percentage points and 1.6 percentage points, respectively. Further, similar to the findings in NYC, CEP increases proficiency rates on the English language arts exams in middle school.

Taken together, the papers provide an optimistic view of the promise of further expansions of UFM policies. Under the CEP, UFM has expanded rapidly across the United States, and this work suggests that district and school leaders nationwide might want to continue considering further expansion of the policy.

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