

September 2025



No Kid Hungry's **Back to School REPORT**

Recognizing that food is the most essential school supply for children in classrooms across the country, No Kid Hungry, the only national campaign dedicated to ending child hunger in America, has conducted a national survey* to gain a deeper understanding of the hopes and concerns parents and caregivers have about the upcoming school year. The findings offer a timely insight into the lives and experiences of these parents as their children return to school, where they will once again have access to free and reduced-price meals.

Parents are working harder to put food on the table—rising food prices and a worsening job market have made keeping up with kids' meals, and their overall health, a challenge.

For many kids, summer is the hungriest time of year as access to school-provided meals becomes more limited. The back-to-school season marks the return of these essential meals and a point of relief for parents and caregivers who balance steadily rising costs of living with the need to provide nutritious meals for their family. For those families, and the millions of others who are one unexpected expense from needing free or reduced-price school meals, federal nutrition programs are a vital resource that consistently make kids healthier and families happier. According to the research, over the past year, more than 1 in 4 families has experienced the loss of a job, and 4 out of 10 parents report a worsened financial situation. The result? **More than 1 in 3 parents worried about running out of food this summer.**



41%

of parents report that their families' financial situation is worse than it was 1 year ago

70%

of parents cite inflation and rising food costs as the primary factor impacting their family's finances

55%

of parents reported that rising food costs due to inflation has made it difficult to buy all of the food they would normally buy



2 in 3 parents

worry food prices will continue to go up throughout the year.

Parents often have to make difficult choices to be able to provide the essentials. **40% of parents report that they worried about having to choose between paying an emergency bill and purchasing food for their children** over the past year.

As families head back to school, and **2 in 3 parents worry food prices will continue to go up** throughout the year, free and reduced-priced school meals will bring much-needed financial and stress relief to parents.

*"Making ends meet is the biggest challenge right now. We both work with five kids in the house. It's a stretch every month to meet everybody's needs. It's tough in this economy. And we do have concerns about feeding them. We watch our dollars a lot closer, but **there are times when we can barely scrape things together to make a meal.**"*

—Colorado mother of five

*"What makes it hard for me now is the rise in prices. We are real budget-friendly, and so that kind of helps. As far as [grocery] shopping, I only try to get what we really need. Driving gas is really high, so I try to minimize where I'm going. It's just certain things that we really cut back on doing. **You just gotta know what you can actually go without and still be okay.**"*

—North Carolina mother of five



It feels like no matter how much you earn, nothing kind of remains. It's living paycheck by paycheck. When you are on a tight budget, a meals from school helps you pass through that difficult phase."

—Georgia father of one



The high prices in food has affected a lot of things because you can do without clothes—you can have like five outfits and just wear those every day—but you have to have food every single day. That's something you can't go without. So you raise those prices, you have no choice but to pay. But that money is coming out of something else that you need. It's a big financial burden."

—North Carolina mother of five

Audience Highlight: Latino Segment

While 1 in 4 of all surveyed parents reported concerns that their child will not be able to eat meals or receive food at school coming into the 2025 school year, Latino parents were even more concerned than the national average.

School meal programs shutting down entirely, as well as eligibility, are among the top concerns cited.

One Latino parent described fears of “*increased hunger, which can lead to difficulty concentrating in school, behavioral problems, and decreased academic achievement,*” if the programs were to shut down or their family lost eligibility. Across Latino segments, parents consistently reported increased financial challenges over the last 12 months, as well as the overall benefits of school meal programs to their kids’ learning and socialization.

Another Latino parent cited the programs’ benefits to quality family time. **For example, losing access to school meals would force them to work extra jobs and they would lose out on time with their kids.**



Food is the most important school supply. School meals increase real-time academic performance and give kids a seat at the table.

With more than half of surveyed parents worrying about back-to-school costs like clothes and notebooks, school meal programs ease concerns about kids having enough to eat during the school day—especially for the nearly half of the parents who indicated that their children may not have food to eat at school some days if the school meal program did not exist. Having a full belly ensures that kids have the mental clarity necessary to learn—or as one parent describes, it helps cut through the “blur” which affects kids experiencing hunger.



These sentiments are shared overwhelmingly by parents, including **83% who agree their children have a hard time concentrating when hungry** and **88% of whom report school meals help their children do better in school.**

Beyond improving focus and academic performance and mental health—more than 1 in 2 parents report that hunger leads to challenges to their kids mental health—**school meals also give them important social connections or quite literally, a seat at the table, reducing stigma and increasing inclusion for kids over a shared meal.**

*The other best thing about the lunch program at school—what I have seen in my daughter—is that it gives her the time to interact with kids in her class better. When they sit down for lunch together—**everyone is having the same lunch—it gives them that place to interact in a better way.***

—Georgia father of one

“When they’re hungry, they’re not very focused. They’re irritated, there’s more arguing—it becomes a very tense environment. ‘I just want to know what I’m eating next,’ and that’s all they can think about. Once they’ve had a nice lunch, they’re coming to ask questions; their mind is more open to things. They’re not blurred from hunger.”

—North Carolina mother of five

Benefits to mood, focus and learning are immediate. And in the long term, especially in the wake of chronic absenteeism following the COVID-19 pandemic, meals provide a number of benefits.

3 out of 5 parents report that school meals motivate their children to attend school regularly.

And some parents report increased extracurricular engagement as well.

“School meals make them able to better participate in staying after school longer so that they’re not hungry before they get home. Their performance [has] a little more stamina.”

—Colorado mother of five

83%

of parents agree that their children have a hard time concentrating when hungry.

88%

of parents report school meals help their children do better in school.



*School lunch is a blessing for my daughter **because it keeps her more balanced and concentrated.** Once she’s well-fed, her activities, like the way she answers questions and tackles some of the math problems, improve drastically.”*

—Georgia father of one



School meal programs set kids up for future success, strengthen families, and build more connected and thriving communities.

The positive influence of meal programs that No Kid Hungry has long championed can't be overstated. The impact ripples out—not just to the overall well-being and future of kids, but to their caregivers and surrounding communities too.

Just as full stomachs lead to better learning and social connection for kids, support for parents leads to stronger families, and stronger families lead to thriving communities.

Across race, ethnicity and education levels, more than 3 in 5 parents share that **school meals are extremely valuable for their family**. For many parents, this value can come in the form of mental health benefits and the ability to be more present with their kids.

While nearly half of parents believe the stress they feel interferes with their parenting, even more—2 in 3—report that school meals help reduce it.

The financial buffer provided by school meals is to thank for children's improved mood and socialization as well as the compounded benefits felt by parents and children alike.

"If we didn't have that buffer, it's going to be very tight and kind of depressing because you're not able to provide them with things which many of the kids in her school are able to do. That kind of also may demotivate her."

—Georgia father of one



*[The financial pressure] just weighs you down, it takes a lot of energy out of you. Less time for the kids, less focus for the kids, more focus on trying to make things work. **It's a bit freeing to not be weighed down with stress so much. We're able to better live your lives because we're [participating in] the programs.***

—Colorado mother of five



*“[Her mood] also affects us... and we react to her. We get upset with her. So it definitely helps. **It takes a big amount of stress from life away and keeps you more composed in doing things.**”*

—Georgia father of one

Community involvement and whole-family socialization are also top of mind for parents who report decreased stress levels due to school meals. **Freedom from the “guilt and depression”** of not being able to provide their kids with everything they need, despite their hard work, enables parents to better fight isolation and integrate their families into their communities by attending social and neighborhood events.

*“Having access [to meal programs] allows me to feel confident to get through my day, living a normal life not worried about food. I would be affected quite a bit if we didn’t have access. **We would be more withdrawn in the community overall. I don’t think we would be as interactive with the kids. We would be in depression, seriously.** If you’re depressed—it affects going out in the community and being involved in things.”*

—Colorado mother of five



It makes a better community all around by having people more involved—they feel more a part of society. *They feel more like they belong and less like a dropout. They care more about their community, they’re more willing to volunteer to be involved, to help out when needed.”*

—Colorado mother of five



It goes beyond meals. Federal nutrition programs improve the lives of kids and their families directly and in the long run.

There is no limit to the good that comes from investing in meals for kids. Federal nutrition programs meet immediate needs to ensure kids can show up in class and have unlimited futures. These programs also provide a game-changing source of relief and stability to hard-working families.

Hunger affects every community in the country. Everyone has friends, family and neighbors who have been affected by hunger. And with rising costs of living showing no signs of slowing down, more and more families may need the support these programs provide. Protecting and investing in them ensures a safer and healthier future for all kids and families.



Learn more about how No Kid Hungry is working to ensure access to meals for kids every day at NoKidHungry.org.

*The 2025 Back To School Report features key findings from parents surveyed this past summer, including a national sample (n = 1,245), as well as a segment of Hispanic parents and caregivers (n = 386). Key survey findings can be found [here](#).

