

# Children Participating in School Meals

## DEFINITION

*Children participating in school meals* is the percentage of children in Rhode Island public schools who participate in the School Breakfast and Lunch Programs.

## SIGNIFICANCE

Founded in 1966 and 1946 respectively, the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP) ensure that the nation's most vulnerable children have access to healthy meals.<sup>1</sup> Nationally, during the 2024-2025 school year, nearly 15.9 million children ate breakfast at school daily through the SBP, an increase of 420,000 in breakfast participation compared to the previous year, and approximately 29.9 million children participated in the NSLP.<sup>2,3</sup> In Rhode Island, in September 2025, 32,069 children participated in the SBP and more than half of all students (68,872) participated in NSLP.<sup>4-6</sup> The federally funded school meals programs offer nutritious meals, which together make up a large proportion of the daily dietary intake of participating children.<sup>7</sup>

In Rhode Island, one in seven (15%) households with children faced food insecurity between 2021-2023.<sup>8</sup> Food-insecure families at times do not have sufficient food to provide nutritious meals for everyone.<sup>9</sup> Childhood hunger has longstanding consequences on child

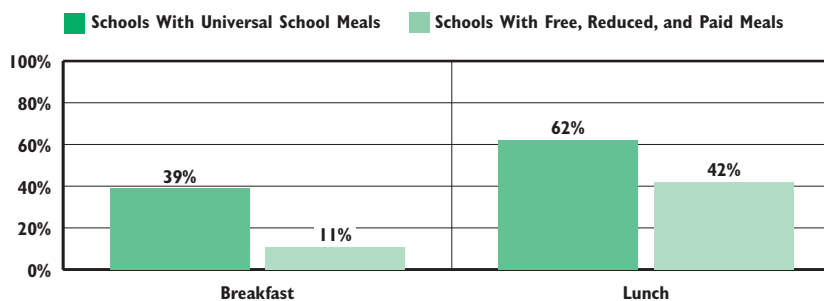
health, and while not always obvious, it is often a barrier to educational attainment.<sup>10</sup> Hunger impacts cognitive development and functioning.<sup>9,11</sup> Hungry children may struggle with concentration and focus, memory, and problem-solving skills and as a result are at risk of falling behind their peers academically.<sup>9-11</sup> Hungry children are also more likely to be absent from school, struggle behaviorally, receive more suspensions, and are more likely to repeat a grade.<sup>12</sup> By providing children with meals they may not otherwise have access to, the SBP and NSLP help schools support academic success, reduce food insecurity, and in turn may improve the well-being and outcomes for children.<sup>13</sup>

Rhode Island law requires that all public schools make breakfasts and lunches available to all students including students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals based on their family's income. Since the 2024-2025 school year, Rhode Island has provided free breakfast and lunch to children who previously qualified for reduced-price meals.<sup>14-16</sup>

Many low-income families lose access to school meals during the summer break, increasing childhood hunger. To help bridge this gap and meet children's nutritional needs, in 2025, Rhode Island launched the SUN Bucks program which provides eligible families with school-aged children \$120 per child for groceries for the summer months.<sup>17</sup>



Percentage of Children Participating in School Meal Programs, Rhode Island, October 2025



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, Child Nutrition Programs, Office of School Health and Wellness, October 2025.

◆ **Universal School Meals Programs provide free breakfast and/or lunch to all children regardless of income, ensuring all children have access to nutritious meals. Providing free meals for all students eliminates the stigma associated with students receiving subsidized priced meals or accruing meal debt, increases participation, and reduces administrative burdens on school districts.<sup>18</sup> In Rhode Island in October 2025, students who attended schools that offer free meals for all students were more likely to participate in school breakfast and lunch than students in schools that do not offer universal school meals.<sup>19</sup>**

◆ **Enacted in 2010, the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a pathway for schools and districts with 25% or more students identified as low-income to provide free universal school meals to all students.<sup>20,21</sup> In Rhode Island, in the 2025-2026 school year, 53% of eligible public schools participated in CEP.<sup>19</sup> Schools identify students as low-income by both collecting applications and automatically enrolling children in families who receive the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other recognized benefits.<sup>22</sup> However, federal H.R. 1, signed into law in July 2025, introduced “structural changes” to SNAP and Medicaid eligibility which may reduce the number of families receiving benefits.<sup>23</sup> With fewer children in families receiving SNAP benefits, the percentage of students identified as low-income may fall below the 25% threshold, resulting in more children experiencing food insecurity, both at home and at school.<sup>24</sup>**

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Table 39.

Children Participating in School Meals, Rhode Island, October 2025

SCHOOL DISTRICT	OCTOBER 2025 ENROLLMENT	ESTIMATED AVERAGE DAILY PARTICIPATION IN BREAKFAST	% OF ALL CHILDREN PARTICIPATING IN BREAKFAST	ESTIMATED AVERAGE DAILY PARTICIPATION IN LUNCH	% OF ALL CHILDREN PARTICIPATING IN LUNCH
Barrington	3,681	141	4%	1,226	33%
Bristol Warren	2,703	218	8%	1,177	44%
Burrillville	1,931	144	7%	787	41%
Central Falls	3,697	1,578	43%	2,889	78%
Chariho	2,912	229	8%	1,206	41%
Coventry	3,938	690	18%	1,878	48%
Cranston	9,770	2,023	21%	4,449	46%
Cumberland	5,668	764	13%	2,343	41%
East Greenwich	2,366	178	8%	866	37%
East Providence	5,066	1,049	21%	2,872	57%
Exeter-West Greenwich	1,537	125	8%	590	38%
Foster	219	41	19%	93	42%
Foster-Glocester	1,281	196	15%	546	43%
Glocester	532	132	25%	244	46%
Jamestown	393	NA	NA	170	43%
Johnston	3,189	499	16%	1,614	51%
Lincoln	3,260	198	6%	1,361	42%
Little Compton	284	*	*	108	38%
Middletown	1,939	184	9%	945	49%
Narragansett	942	58	6%	296	31%
New Shoreham	124	13	10%	34	27%
Newport	1,763	378	21%	1,075	61%
North Kingstown	3,752	380	10%	1,511	40%
North Providence	4,304	713	17%	1,836	43%
North Smithfield	1,640	120	7%	732	45%
Pawtucket	7,627	2,476	32%	5,553	73%
Portsmouth	2,219	193	9%	948	43%
Providence	19,470	10,779	55%	12,651	65%
Scituate	1,249	87	7%	463	37%
Smithfield	2,296	209	9%	1,010	44%
South Kingstown	2,036	133	7%	896	44%
Tiverton	1,951	115	6%	661	34%
Warwick	8,406	635	8%	3,266	39%
West Warwick	3,366	916	27%	2,092	62%
Westerly	1,969	278	14%	790	40%
Woonsocket	5,227	1,725	33%	3,249	62%
<i>Charter Schools</i>	<i>11,070</i>	<i>4,370</i>	<i>39%</i>	<i>6,121</i>	<i>55%</i>
<i>State-Operated Schools</i>	<i>2,086</i>	<i>592</i>	<i>28%</i>	<i>1,294</i>	<i>62%</i>
<i>Collaboratives</i>	<i>283</i>	<i>89</i>	<i>31%</i>	<i>202</i>	<i>71%</i>
<i>Five Core Cities</i>	<i>37,784</i>	<i>16,936</i>	<i>45%</i>	<i>25,417</i>	<i>67%</i>
<i>Remainder of State</i>	<i>84,923</i>	<i>10,664</i>	<i>13%</i>	<i>37,010</i>	<i>44%</i>
<i>Rhode Island</i>	<i>136,146</i>	<i>32,651</i>	<i>24%</i>	<i>70,044</i>	<i>51%</i>

## Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Education, Child Nutrition Programs, Office of School Health and Wellness, October 2025

During the 2025-2026 school year, all schools in the districts: Achievement First Rhode Island, Blackstone Valley Prep, Central Falls, Highlander, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, West Warwick and Woonsocket; the schools: Charette Charter, Excel Academy Rhode Island, William M. Davies Jr. Career & Technical High School, Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, Sheila Skip Nowell Leadership Academy, Nuestro Mundo Public Charter School, Providence Preparatory Charter School, Rhode Island Nurses Institute Middle College Charter High School, Rhode Island School for the Deaf, Segue Institute for Learning, SouthSide Elementary Charter School, Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts, Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program, Village Green Virtual Charter School, and YouthBuild Preparatory Academy; and some schools in Chariho, North Kingstown were using CEP.

\*Fewer than 10 students are in this category. Actual numbers are not shown to protect student confidentiality. These students are still counted in district totals and in the five core cities, remainder of the state, and state totals.

Charter Schools include Achievement First Rhode Island, BEACON Charter School, Blackstone Academy Charter School, Blackstone Valley Prep, Charette Charter School, The Compass School, Excel Academy of Rhode Island, The Greene School, Highlander Charter School, International Charter School, Kingston Hill Academy, Nuestro Mundo Public Charter School, Paul Cuffee Charter School, Providence Preparatory Charter School, Rhode Island Nurses Institute Middle College Charter High School, SouthSide Elementary Charter School, Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts and Green Virtual Charter School.

State-Operate Schools include William. M. Davies Jr. Career-Technical High School, DCYF Alternative Education Program, Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, Sheila "Skip" Nowell Leadership Academy, and Rhode Island School for the Deaf.

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<sup>6</sup> Zablotsky, B., Black, L. I., Maenner, M. J., & Schieve, Laura A.,...Boyle, Coleen A. (2019). Prevalence and trends of developmental disabilities among children in the United States: 2009-2017. *Pediatrics*, 144(4), e20190811.

<sup>7</sup> Rhode Island Department of Education, Office for Diverse Learners. (2026). *Special Education Census, June 30, 2025*.

<sup>8</sup> Rhode Island Department of Education. (n.d.). *June 2019 Special Education Census*.

<sup>9</sup> U.S Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education. (2023). *Policy statement on inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood programs*. <https://sites.ed.gov/ideal>

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<sup>1</sup> Barton, P. E. & Coley, R. J. (2009). *Parsing the achievement gap II*. Educational Testing Service.

<sup>2</sup> Rhode Island Department of Education. (2026). *Public schools enrollment dashboard*.

<sup>3</sup> RIDE. (2025). *Private/parochial school data, 2024-2025 school year*.

<sup>4</sup> RIDE. (2025). *RI Pre-K enrollment October 1, 2025*.

<sup>5</sup> RIDE, Office of Diverse Learners. (2025). *Special Education Census, 2024-2025 school year*.

<sup>6</sup> RIDE, Office of Diverse Learners. (2025). *English Learner Census, 2024-2025 school year*.

<sup>7</sup> Carver-Thomas, D. (2018). *Diversifying the teacher profession: How to recruit and retain teachers of color*. Learning Policy Institute.

<sup>8</sup> New England Secondary School Consortium. (2020). *Increasing the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the educator workforce: A call to action for leaders*. <https://www.greatschoolspartnership.org/diversifying-the-educator-workforce/>

<sup>9</sup> Lachlan-Haché, L., Creque, D., Kimmel, L., El-Mekki, S., Corsello. (2023). *Prioritizing an integrated approach to educator shortages and workforce diversity, part 2: Innovative strategies and examples across the talent development continuum*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED660776.pdf>

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#### Source of Data for Table/Methodology for Children Participating in School Meals

Collaboratives include Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program, West Bay Collaborative and YouthBuild Preparatory Academy.

Five core cities are Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

The October 2025 enrollment is for the full month of October and is not comparable with the October 1, 2025 enrollment numbers reported elsewhere in the 2026 *Factbook*.

#### References for Children Participating in School Meals

<sup>1</sup> Hayes, T., & Williams, A. (2021). *The School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program: A Primer*. <https://www.americanactionforum.org/print/>

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of Agriculture: Food and Nutrition Service. (2025). *School breakfast program participation and meals served*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>

<sup>3</sup> United States Department of Agriculture: Food and Nutrition Service. (2025). *National school lunch program: Participation and lunches served*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>

<sup>4</sup> United States Department of Agriculture: Food and Nutrition Service. (2025). *School breakfast program: Children participating*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>

<sup>5</sup> United States Department of Agriculture: Food and Nutrition Service. (2025). *National school lunch program: Total participation*. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>

<sup>6</sup> Rhode Island Department of Education. (2026). *October 1, 2025*.

<sup>7</sup> Cullen, K. W., & Chen, T. (2017). The contribution of the USDA school breakfast and lunch program meals to student daily dietary intake. *Preventive Medicine Reports*, 5, 82–85.

<sup>8</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2025). *KIDS COUNT Data Center*. <datacenter.kidscount.org>

<sup>9</sup> No Kid Hungry. (2023). *How does hunger affect learning?* <https://www.nokidhungry.org/blog/how-does-hunger-affect-learning>

<sup>10</sup> Utah Food Bank. (2023). *Back to school hunger: Addressing a hidden educational barrier*. <https://www.utahfoodbank.org/2023/08/08/back-to-school-hunger-addressing-a-hiddeneducational-barrier>

<sup>11</sup> Cook, J., Jeng, K. (2009). *Child food insecurity: The economic impact on our nation*. Feeding America.

<sup>12</sup> Food Research and Action Center. (2016). *Research brief: Breakfast for learning*. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfastforlearning-1.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Food Research and Action Center. (2021). *School meals are essential for student health and learning*. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Rhode Island Department of Education. (n.d.). *School breakfast program*. Retrieved March 26, 2025, from <https://ride.ri.gov/child-nutrition/nutritionprograms/>

<sup>15</sup> Rhode Island Department of Education. (n.d.). *National school lunch program*. Retrieved March 26, 2025, from <https://ride.ri.gov/child-nutrition/nutrition-programs/national-school-lunch-program>

<sup>16</sup> *State of Rhode Island General Assembly*. (n.d.). Retrieved March 18, 2026, from [https://www.rilegislature.gov/pressrelease/\\_layouts/15/ril.pressrelease.inputform/DisplayForm.aspx?List=c8baae31-3c10-431c-8dcd-9dbbe21ce3e9&ID=374693](https://www.rilegislature.gov/pressrelease/_layouts/15/ril.pressrelease.inputform/DisplayForm.aspx?List=c8baae31-3c10-431c-8dcd-9dbbe21ce3e9&ID=374693)

<sup>17</sup> Rhode Island Department of Human Services. (n.d.). *SUN Bucks*. Retrieved January 25, 2026, from <https://dhs.ri.gov/programs-and-services/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap/supplemental-nutrition-10>

<sup>18</sup> First Focus Campaign for Children. (2023). *Universal school meals: Policy brief*. <https://campaignforchildren.org/resource/issue-brief-universal-school-meals/>

<sup>19</sup> Rhode Island Department of Education, Child Nutrition Programs, Office of School Health and Wellness. (n.d.). *October 2025*.

<sup>20</sup> Food Research & Action Center. (2024). *Community eligibility: The key to hunger-free schools 2024*. <https://frac.org/cep-report-2024>

<sup>21</sup> Food Research & Action Center. (2025). *School meals support children's health and learning*. <https://frac.org/school-meals>

<sup>22</sup> Rhode Island Department of Education. (n.d.). *Free or reduced-price school meals application*. Retrieved January 26, 2026, from <https://ride.ri.gov/child-nutrition/free-or-reduced-price-school-meals-application>

<sup>23</sup> School Nutrition Association. (2025). *Impact of HR 1 on school meal programs*. <https://schoolnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/TAM-25-SNA-BBB-Bill-Summary.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Food Research & Action Center. (2025). *State-by-state CEP fact sheets 2025: Rhode Island*. <https://frac.org/research/resource-library/cep-fact-sheets-2025>

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<sup>12</sup> Afterschool Alliance. (2023). *21st Century Community Learning Centers: Accelerating learning, supporting families, earning results*. [www.afterschoolalliance.org](http://www.afterschoolalliance.org)

<sup>13</sup> Rhode Island Department of Education, Office of Student, Community and Academic Supports. (2026). *21st Century Community Learning Center enrollment 2024-2025*.

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<sup>16</sup> Rhode Island Department of Human Services and Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children. (n.d.). *January 2026*.

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<sup>3</sup> Rhode Island Department of Education. (2024). *Rhode Island's Strategy for Improving Outcomes for Multilingual Learners*. [ride.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur806/files/2024-09/Encl5d\\_MLL\\_Deck\\_Regs.pdf](https://ride.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur806/files/2024-09/Encl5d_MLL_Deck_Regs.pdf)