

## Summary of the Expand School Meals Act

### Senator Al Franken

No child should be hungry at school. Under the National School Lunch Program, some students from low-income families are required to pay a reduced-price fee for their meals. But when families are unable to pay, kids can be turned away from the school lunch counter. The Expand School Meals Act would expand free meal eligibility to children from families who currently qualify for reduced-price meals and help ensure that all kids have access to healthy meals in school.

**The problem.** Nearly 30 million of our nation's children participate in the National School Lunch Program, and 21.5 million of these children receive free or reduced-price meals based on their family's income level. Currently, children from families between 130 percent and 185 percent of poverty are eligible for reduced-price meals, which cost 40 cents as compared to \$1.93-\$2.20 for full-price meals.

Unfortunately, many children who are eligible for reduced-price meals cannot afford to pay what they owe. And many of these children are being turned away from the school lunch counter or are offered less nutritious alternative meals, such as cheese sandwiches. For example, a recent study by the Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid found that over half of school districts in Minnesota were denying children hot meals when they couldn't afford to pay the 40 cents for lunch.

**The solution.** Expanding eligibility for free school meals to students who are currently offered reduced-price meals would improve the nutrition and health of these children. Expanding eligibility for free school meals increases the amount of nutrients children receive, while improving the readiness of low-income children for school. Parents understand – and research confirms – that children learn better with full stomachs. Hungry children perform worse on tests, have trouble concentrating, and are more likely to act out.

**Senator Franken's Expand School Meals Act** would expand access to free meals for children currently in the reduced-price meal category. Specifically, this bill would:

- Phase-in an expansion of the eligibility for free meals to students from families with incomes up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level. The state-by-state phase-in is modeled on the Community Eligibility provisions in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010.
- During the phase-in years, schools in states that have passed statewide laws eliminating the reduced-price copay for breakfast or lunch will be eligible to expand the service of free lunch and breakfast for children in families up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level.
- Once eligibility is expanded nationally, schools in every state will have the opportunity to eliminate the reduced-price lunch category, which will allow all children from families up to 185 percent of poverty guidelines to be eligible for free meals nationwide.