

National School Lunch Program

By 2012, some 31 million US children—more than half of all public school students—received free or reduced-price meals.

A hungry child cannot learn. Yet despite this obvious fact, it's taken more than a century to ensure widespread access to free and reduced-price school meals to children in the United States. The story begins in the late 19th century, when private child-welfare organizations, like the Starr Centre Association in Philadelphia, first championed the concept of providing “penny lunches” to hungry low-income students at US schools. By the early 20th century, cities and eventually states followed suit and began to develop programs for feeding disadvantaged students, a concept the federal government made policy during the Great Depression.

World War II efforts slowed expansion, but post-war the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was established and, with another push from philanthropy, the program grew dramatically, eventually reaching almost all students in need.

How did philanthropy spark, then reignite, government action? Early, place-based, philanthropically driven efforts in cities like Philadelphia and Boston first demonstrated a recipe to solve this problem. Then, the Great Depression greatly exacerbated and

This case study is part of a series that accompanies The Bridgespan Group article “[Audacious Philanthropy: Lessons from 15 World-Changing Initiatives](#)” (*Harvard Business Review*, Sept/Oct 2017). See below for [15 stories of social movements](#) that defied the odds and learn how philanthropy played a role in achieving their life-changing results.

- [The Anti-Apartheid Movement](#)
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highlighted the depths of hunger in America. In response, in 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration set up a New Deal agency (Federal Surplus Relief Corporation/Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation) to distribute surplus food, such as pork and dairy products, to those in need. Part of this effort included the first federal implementation of a school lunch program. The agency placed representatives in each state to work with local schools to spur participation, which grew more than five-fold from about 900,000 students in 1939 to 5.2 million in 1942.

During the country's post-WWII recovery, appropriations for school lunch became codified in the 1946 National School Lunch Act, fueling program growth in the baby boom era to 18.9 million participating children by 1967, or about 42 percent of 45 million enrolled students.

Then, in 1968, two reports funded by the Field Foundation of New York highlighted the great degree to which hunger still remained a problem in the country, including among many poor children who were not being reached by the school lunch program. Following Senator Robert Kennedy's probe into the effectiveness of the nation's "War on Poverty" programs, the advocacy nonprofit Citizens' Crusade Against Poverty formed a volunteer group called the Citizens' Board of Inquiry into Hunger, which Field and other foundations funded to objectively investigate reports of hunger across the South as well as its reach into other states. The result, *Hunger USA*, was a well-publicized report on poverty-related malnutrition across America, which CBS turned into an important documentary. Field also funded a second report, *Their Daily Bread*, led by a number of women's civil rights and religious groups that called themselves the Committee on School Lunch Participation, which focused on the need for school lunches for poor children. *Their Daily Bread* was released the same month as *Hunger USA*. Both garnered significant public and federal government attention.

A year later, in response to these extensive studies and the resulting public concern, Congress realigned the NSLP to focus on poor students, and President Nixon created the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to administer the program. By 1986 children below the poverty line made up half of school lunch recipients, up from less than one-third in 1971. Today almost all public schools in the country participate in the NSLP and, on an average school day, 21.5 million low-income children (making up 70 percent of students who receive their lunch at school) receive lunch for free or at a reduced price.

This is tremendous progress. And in addition to lunch, the federal government also legislated the national School Breakfast Program in 1975, and today it serves more than 12 million low-income students. At the same time, work remains to be done: Poor children still fail to receive the free or reduced lunch to which they are entitled (and many more don't get breakfast), in part because many schools and states do not implement the program in line with best practices, and in part because others stigmatize participants. Stories of public shaming of students who can't pay for their food routinely appear in national news. Philanthropically supported organizations like No Kid Hungry, the Food Research and Action Center, and others continue the fight to further expand—and also defend—access to these programs.

Philanthropy's Role in Large-Scale Change

Our research shows that breakthrough social initiatives share a set of [five practical approaches to large-scale change](#). In the case of NSLP, philanthropy funded three of them:

- **Craft an emotionally compelling “winnable milestone”:** The messaging in *Hunger USA* painted a dire picture about the state of hunger in America. *Their Daily Bread* provided a specific goal: The report suggested expanding the federal role and especially focused on special assistance funds, which are used to supplement free and reduced-price lunches.
- **Drive demand, don't assume it:** Two foundation-funded reports drove demand. For one, *Hunger USA*, The Citizen's Board of Inquiry into Hunger designed it to attract the attention of voters, who could spur action on the part of policymakers. *Hunger USA*'s translation into a Peabody-winning CBS documentary, *Hunger in America*, helped to galvanize the public in support. The other Field-funded report, *Their Daily Bread*, targeted policymakers, providing a more focused look at the National School Lunch Act.
- **Embrace course correction:** These two reports, *Hunger USA* and *Their Daily Bread*, funded by the Field Foundation in the late 1960s, captivated the nation and informed political debate. This boosted the NSLP from a relatively “steady state” of funding and incremental growth (reaching almost 19 million children) to a sea-change in policy, which helped the program serve low-income children much more effectively.

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