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Michigan's school meals program caters to the wealthy

Money would be better spent on literacy efforts

By Molly Macek | November 2025

The state of Michigan spends more taxpayer dollars to feed students in wealthy districts than in poor ones. With Michigan near the bottom in national reading scores, these funds would be better spent on helping kids read than subsidizing lunches for families who can afford their own.

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer declared Oct. 13-17 as Free School Lunch Week, according to a press release from the Michigan Department of Education. This came shortly after she signed the 2026 school aid budget, which included funding for the state's School Meals Program.

The governor claimed the program “lowers costs for working families,” saving them \$1,000 per kid per year. She did not cite the origin of that statistic, but it is hard to believe, based on how much districts spend on school lunches. Districts report spending about \$700 per pupil on food services.

The state's “free” school meals program may not come with a weekly fee. But it does come at a significant cost to taxpayers. It takes \$248 million annually to provide no-fee breakfasts and lunches for students in districts with a higher-income population.

For example, the state paid the Grand Blanc school district \$135 per student to provide no-fee breakfasts and lunches last year. Meanwhile, the neighboring district of Flint – where almost all students are considered economically disadvantaged – received no state aid for school lunches.

That's because the federal government already subsidizes lunches for low-income students. In high-poverty districts, including Flint, every student gets a free lunch through the National School Lunch Program. The state's universal school meals program, as a result, only subsidizes lunches for other students,

who disproportionately attend school districts in wealthier areas.

Another example is St. Joseph Public Schools. Only 20% of the districts' students are considered economically disadvantaged, but the state paid the district \$323 per student to cover lunches for its students. Conversely, the neighboring district of Benton Harbor – where economically disadvantaged students make up 94% of the student population – received \$0 from the state to feed its students.

The state didn't give Grand Rapids any funding for universal school meals, either. But it did give its suburban neighbor, Forest Hills, \$319 per pupil.

And Lansing, a high-poverty district, received no state aid for the Universal School Meals Program. Wealthier East Lansing, meanwhile, got \$171 per student from state taxpayers.

While the state spends millions to subsidize meals for wealthier districts, its reading and math scores are still lower than they were in 2019.

Nationally, Michigan ranks 44th in fourth grade reading. Some states, including Mississippi, Louisiana

and Tennessee, eclipsed the Great Lakes State in reading proficiency after adopting reforms that led to significant achievement gains.

Meanwhile, Gov. Whitmer supports using state aid to subsidize school meals for wealthier students. In a statement to the Department of Education, she said, "I'm proud to sign my seventh balanced, bipartisan budget that continues free school meals for all, so Michigan kids and families can focus on learning."

Most can agree with the governor that Michigan kids and families need to focus on learning. But is subsidizing lunches for students in wealthier districts the best way to make that happen? Lawmakers ought to spend these dollars on reforms that directly address student academic achievement.

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