



**School Meals
FOR ALL NC
CHAMPION**

Starter Kit

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Welcome



Message from the School Meals for All North Carolina Leadership Team

The School Meals for All NC (SMFANC) Leadership Team thanks you for your ongoing commitment to this movement. Your advocacy, energy, and creativity continue to drive meaningful change in our community.

You have the support of four Leadership Team organizations to guide you through this advocacy journey. We are also here to advance the mission on advocacy day at the North Carolina General Assembly, in monthly virtual meetings, community events like fun runs and more.



Within the SMFANC Leadership Team, we are committed to celebrating the strengths and differences that each of our organizations brings. It's this spirit of inclusion and respect that guides our approach to celebrating the diversity across North Carolina and honoring differences in voices, perspectives, and values across this coalition.



The Vision, Mission, & Guiding Principles

The Vision

To end childhood food insecurity in North Carolina.

Mission

Ensure that every child in every public school in North Carolina has access to breakfast and lunch at school at no cost to their families.

Guiding Principles

- No child should go hungry.
- School meals should be available at no cost to all students in public schools.
- No child should experience shame or stigma due to an inability to pay for school meals.
- School meals help children succeed both in and out of school and build strong, resilient communities.



THE SMFANC CHAMPION PROGRAM



WHY COMMUNITY VOICE MATTERS

The SMFANC coalition is driven by communities, youth, public health advocates, and educators. We value grassroots and grassroots voices across North Carolina who advocate for every child in every public school in NC to have access to breakfast and lunch in school at no cost to their families.

SMFANC Champions must live in North Carolina and can be any age.

Individuals under 18 years old must have parental/guardian consent

SMFANC CHAMPION FAQs



What is a SMFANC Champion?

SMFANC Champions are supporters of school meals for all in North Carolina. They are willing to volunteer and speak out to support, educate, and advance the coalition's mission. Champion stories can showcase many different aspects of how school meals impact students' personal lives, friends, academics, and extracurricular activities. There are numerous ways to share your story as a SMFANC Champion, depending on what you feel comfortable with. We will help you develop your issue advocacy skills and clarify the difference between advocacy and lobbying.



What is the time commitment to be a SMFANC Champion?

We understand that availability and comfort level for engagement vary from Champion to Champion, so there is no mandatory commitment level. Champions have the freedom to choose how they engage; whether that's developing their story for print or digital media, providing key testimony to lawmakers, speaking at a town hall, participating in interviews, and more.



Who can become a SMFANC Champion?

Anyone who supports the mission of School Meals for All NC and is willing to speak out to support, educate, and advance the coalition mission can become a Champion. Students under 18 are welcome to become Champions with parental consent.



Who can attend the monthly virtual meetings?

We invite anyone who supports SMFANC to join our monthly Community Advocacy meetings. This includes representatives from organizations, individuals interested in becoming Champions, and committed Champions.

During these meetings, we provide campaign updates so supporters feel connected. Attendance is not mandatory for Champions, but is highly encouraged to familiarize with coalition messaging and take advantage of various trainings, workshops, and peer support.



When are the monthly virtual meetings?

The sessions are typically held on the first Tuesday of the month from 6pm-7pm. Register to join and add these meetings to your calendar via the Zoom link [here](#).



Where can I sign up to officially become a SMFANC Champion?

Anyone interested in becoming a SMFANC Champion can sign up [here](#).



After I become a SMFANC Champion, how can I help eliminate food insecurity in NC and advance the coalition mission?

SMFANC Champions can help choose from a number of opportunities to share their story based on their availability and comfort level. Potential ways to engage include:

- Written Story Sharing
 - Letter to the Editor/Op-ed
 - Legislative Drops
 - Contact Your Legislator Emails
- Verbal Story Sharing
 - SMFANC Town Hall speaker role
 - Advocacy Day testimony
- Social Media Story Sharing
 - Champion Spotlight Posts
 - SMFANC Website Blog Posts
- Co-Host Events with the SMFANC Leadership Team
 - SMFANC Town Hall events
 - SMFANC Cafeteria Jam events
 - SMFANC Open House events
- Submit an Event Interest Form [here](#)



For questions email us at:
smfa@centerforblackhealth.org

SMFANC AMBASSADOR PROGRAM



WHY YOUTH VOICE MATTERS

With the support of the School Meals for All NC Leadership Team, Ambassadors participate in policy and systems change training, use GIS and story mapping to highlight the impact of school meals, build social media advocacy skills, and help plan and attend local and statewide conferences and convenings.

SMFANC Ambassadors must live in North Carolina and be ages 13–24.

SMFANC AMBASSADOR FAQs



What is the SMFANC Ambassador Program?

The School Meals for All NC Ambassadors Program is one of the ways North Carolina youth can get involved and advance the mission. The Ambassadors Program recognizes young leaders as essential collaborative partners who strengthen our coalition, uplifting their personal experiences. The program is a safe space for students to speak freely and bravely.



What is the time commitment for an SMFANC Ambassador?

Ambassadors are required to participate in regular virtual team meetings, one-on-one check-ins, and activity reporting. On average, this role requires a commitment of approximately 10 hours per month, depending on team activities and events. Currently, there are many Ambassadors and various teams across the state. This includes Roanoke Valley, the Triad, Bertie County, and New Hanover County.



Where can I sign up to officially become an SMFANC Ambassador?

The coalition prioritizes youth engagement and values student perspectives, ensuring that advocacy and policy efforts meant to benefit students are also shaped by students. North Carolinians ages 13–24, from across the state, are encouraged to apply! All prospective ambassadors will be interviewed before joining the team.



If I'm between 13 and 24 years old, can I also be a SMFANC Champion?

Yes. The Champion program does not have a defined age range. However, the Ambassador program focuses on building advocacy skills for youth ages 13–24. If you meet the Ambassador age requirement, you're welcome to participate in both programs.

Reducing Food Insecurity in NC



Mission

Ensure that every child in every public school in North Carolina has access to breakfast and lunch at school at no cost to their families.

Key Messages

- Hungry kids can't learn.
- Kids who eat healthy school meals do better in school.
- School meals should be equally accessible to all students.
- All students should have access to nutritious school meals at no cost.
- Ensuring all kids have access to no-cost school meals is one of the best investments we can make in their success.
- 28% of children in North Carolina who don't have enough to eat likely don't qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The current system leaves many NC students behind. (Source: NC Meal Claim Data)
- 1 in 5 kids goes hungry in NC. Providing no-cost school meals can help. No-cost school meals are an investment in academic performance.
- Many families struggle to meet basic needs but do not qualify for free or reduced-price meals.
- Many students qualify for free or reduced-price meals but do not receive them due to shame, stigma, or administrative barriers.
- Food is the most important school supply.
- In a 2023 School Nutrition Survey, 81% of voters in NC supported school meals for all.



Investing in NC Agriculture, Farmers, & Farmland Preservation



Immediate Benefits for Agricultural Economies

- Elimination of school meal stigma increases participation and total food volume purchased.
- SMFANC combats childhood hunger and stabilizes school food budgets.
- This would provide predictable revenue, which helps school districts to:
 - Reduce the pressure to cut food costs
 - Allow districts to prioritize local sourcing
 - Enter into longer-term purchasing agreements with local farmers

Mid-term Benefits for Growing Farm-to-School Infrastructure

Increased school cafeteria revenue to support:

- Higher-quality, locally sourced ingredients
- Kitchen equipment needed to process fresh, whole foods
- Additional food service staff and higher wages

Unlock School Nutrition Staff time to:

- Build relationships with local farmers, processors, and distributors
- Develop scratch-cooked menus that utilize local products

More resilient local food economy that:

- Supports local food hubs and aggregation infrastructure
- Promotes environmentally sustainable practices by rewarding farmers who use eco-friendly methods

Long-Term Benefits for Farmland Preservation

Strong, consistent demand for environmentally-friendly ingredients and climate-resilient farming practices helps:

- Maintain productive farmland to prevent land being sold for development
- Develop generations of students who understand where their food comes from and value local agriculture

Each dollar invested in farm-to-school initiatives stimulates up to \$2 in additional local economic activity. In one case, resulting in a \$1.4 million overall contribution to the State.

For every job created by school districts purchasing local foods, up to two jobs are created in the area.

Invest in North Carolina school food programs, farmers, and farm land!

1. National Farm to School Network. (2024). [How School Meals for All Can Improve Meal Quality and Put Local Food on the Menu.](#)

2. National Farm to School Network (2020). The Benefits of Farm to School. <https://www.farmtoschool.org/resources-main/benefits-of-farm-to-school>

3. Farm to School Network (2020). The Benefits of Farm to School. <https://www.farmtoschool.org/resources-main/benefits-of-farm-to-school>

Investing in the Future Workforce



1. Healthy Kids Grow into Productive Employees

- **A child that cannot learn may grow up to be an adult that cannot earn.** Access to nutritious meals helps students learn and develop critical skills. This means fewer dropouts and a better-prepared workforce.
- **Fewer sick days, better performance.** Students who are well-nourished have better attendance and fewer health issues, which translates into long-term habits of reliability—exactly what employers want in their future hires.

2. Economic Growth for Local Businesses

- **Strong schools build strong economies.** Businesses thrive in communities with good schools because quality education attracts families and workers to the area.
- **Support for local farmers and food producers.** Many school meals programs source ingredients locally, creating a positive economic ripple effect for NC farmers, agricultural businesses, and food suppliers.

3. Reduced Long-Term Costs for Businesses and Communities

- **Less hunger, better outcomes.** Hungry kids are more likely to struggle academically and socially, which can lead to higher unemployment and social service costs down the line. Tackling childhood food insecurity now reduces economic pains in the future.
- **Healthier kids mean lower healthcare costs.** Early access to healthy food reduces the risk of chronic diseases like diabetes and heart conditions, helping control healthcare costs for future employees and their families.

4. Promoting Equity and Social Stability

- **Breaking the cycle of poverty.** When every child has access to free school meals, families have less financial stress. This stability benefits local businesses, as families have more money to spend on other necessities.
- **Universal access removes stigma.** When every child has access to no-cost meals, it eliminates the distinction between kids who qualify for free or reduced-price meals and those who don't. This helps foster a more inclusive school environment, setting the tone for a collaborative and equitable workplace culture in the future.

5. Corporate Social Responsibility Opportunity

- **Business can be a champion for the next generation.** By supporting school meals for all, businesses can align themselves with a cause that demonstrates care for their community. Investing in children today enhances brand reputation and builds goodwill among employees and customers.

Investing in Student Mental Health



Why It Matters

Access to nutritious meals at school is more than a matter of physical health—it's a cornerstone of emotional well-being and academic success. No-cost school meals help ensure that all students, regardless of income, have the nourishment they need to thrive mentally and socially.

Key Mental Health Benefits



1. Reduces Anxiety and Emotional Distress:

Food insecurity is strongly linked to mental health challenges in children and teens, including apathy, anxiety, irritability, and depression.



2. Improves Focus and Classroom Behavior:

Hunger impairs concentration and increases behavioral issues. Students experiencing hunger are more likely to be hyperactive, absent, and tardy, and to have behavioral and attention problems.



3. Supports Equitable Learning Environments:

Universal no-cost meals eliminate the stigma associated with receiving no-cost or reduced-price meals, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing social anxiety among students.



4. Increased Social Interaction:

No-cost school meal programs can create opportunities for students to eat together and interact socially, which is important for fostering a sense of belonging and positive mental health.

Conclusion

- **School meals enhance academic performance.**
 - Students participating in no-cost meal programs have shown improved test scores and reduced absenteeism.
- **School meals alleviate family stress.**
 - Providing no-cost meals reduces household financial strain, contributing to better mental health for both students and their families.

1. Food Research & Action Center. (2018). Breakfast for behavior: A review of the relationship between breakfast and behavior. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/breakfast-for-behavior.pdf>

2. Food Research & Action Center. (2017). Hunger and health: The impact of poverty, food insecurity, and health on well-being. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/hunger-health-impact-poverty-food-insecurity-health-well-being.pdf>

3. Power, E. M. (2022). Food insecurity and health: A critical review of the literature. PMC Article, 12(4), 123456. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2021-059047.

SOCIAL MEDIA



When sharing the awesome work you are doing on behalf of SMFANC, be sure to:

TAG US

Be sure to tag us in your post on any of the following platforms



@Schoolmealsforallnc



@Schoolmealsforallnc



@SchoolMeals4NC



School Meals for All NC



School Meals for All NC



@schoolmeals4allnc.bsky.social



School Meals for All NC

HASHTAG USE

Apart from others, be sure to add #SchoolMealsForAllNC and #SMFANC to your captions

VOICE AND TONE

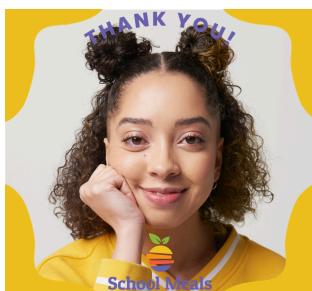
The campaign uses friendly and approachable language while maintaining professionalism across digital platforms. This voice and tone is expected to be used by all members of the coalition, champions and supporters.

SAMPLE CAPTION:

1 in 5 kids in North Carolina go hungry; providing no-cost school meals can help!

We are working to ensure that every child in every public school in North Carolina has access to breakfast and lunch at school at NO COST to their families.

Please join us – [SchoolMealsForAllNC.org](https://www.SchoolMealsForAllNC.org)
#SchoolMealsForAllNC #SMFANC



OUR ADVOCACY JOURNEY

Before the SMFANC coalition formalized in 2022, several incremental steps were achieved to move the state closer to a school meals for all policy. Our advocacy journey is far from over. Every step brings us closer to eliminating food insecurity.

2011

Reduced Price Breakfast Copay



2020–2023

COVID-19 Waivers: Federal \$ covered school breakfast and lunch for all students



2023

Reduced Price Lunch Copay

CEP Meal Incentive Program
Schol Year 2024-2025
(reoccurring)

Meal Debt Language



2025

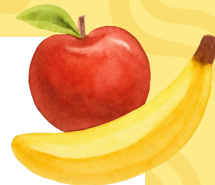
Bipartisan breakfast for all bill introduced in the NC House of Representatives

Each conversation sparked, partnership forged, and story shared adds momentum to the SMFANC movement. Keep pushing forward, sharing stories and inspire others to join!

Submit the form [here](#) or email it to smfa@centerforblackhealth.org

SMFANC

Champion Feedback Form



Full Name _____

County _____

Which Champion training/workshop did you participate in?

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Champion Spotlight Workshop | ☐ Legislative Advocacy 101 Workshop |
| ☐ Elevator Pitch Workshop | ☐ Coalition Power Building Workshop Part 2 |
| ☐ Storytelling Workshop | ☐ Opposition Messaging Workshop |
| ☐ Media Training Workshop | ☐ Messaging Under Pressure Workshop |

What topics or skills do you want to be covered more deeply in the future?

Which activities/events did you participate in?

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Advocacy Day | ☐ Town Hall (In-person attendance) |
| ☐ Ambassador-led events | ☐ Town Hall (Virtual attendance) |
| ☐ Contact Your Legislator Email | ☐ Virtual Coalition Meeting |

The activity/event prepared me to represent the coalition effectively

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| ☐ Strongly Agree | ☐ Neither agree nor disagree | |
| ☐ Agree | ☐ Disagree | ☐ Strongly Disagree |

I feel supported by SMFANC Leadership Team/ Champion Program staff

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| ☐ Strongly Agree | ☐ Neither agree nor disagree | |
| ☐ Agree | ☐ Disagree | ☐ Strongly Disagree |

The SMFANC Champion Starter Kit materials and talking points provided were helpful

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| ☐ Strongly Agree | ☐ Neither agree nor disagree | |
| ☐ Agree | ☐ Disagree | ☐ Strongly Disagree |

Which parts of the SMFANC Champion Starter Kit were most useful, and what additions to the Starter Kit would be helpful?

What topics or skills do you want to be covered more deeply in the future?

Any additional comments or suggestions?

Glossary



**AFTERSCHOOL
SNACK PROGRAM**
(ASSP)



An extension of the National School Lunch Program that is administered by local school food authorities. The school food authority provides an afterschool care program, which includes educational or enrichment activities and snacks.

**CHILD AND ADULT
CARE FOOD
PROGRAM**
(CACFP)



A federal program that provides reimbursements for nutritious meals and snacks to eligible children and adults who are enrolled for care at participating child care centers, day care homes, and adult day care centers.

**CHILD NUTRITION
REAUTHORIZATION**
(CNR)



The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act authorizes all of the federal school meal and child nutrition programs. It is supposed to occur every five years in Congress but has not been done since 2010.

**COMMUNITY
ELIGIBILITY
PROVISION**
(CEP)



A meal service option that allows schools located in high-poverty areas to provide universal free breakfast and lunch. The program became available nationwide in SY 2014-2015. A meal service option that allows schools located in high-poverty areas to provide universal free breakfast and lunch. The program became available nationwide in SY 2014-2015.

**DIRECT
CERTIFICATION**



The method by which schools qualify for CEP by certifying the rate of beneficiaries of other public benefit programs such as SNAP.

**FREE AND
REDUCED-PRICE
MEALS**
(FRPM)



School meals that are subsidized to account for the economic need of families.

**FRESH FRUIT &
VEGETABLE
PROGRAM**
(FFVP)



A federally assisted program that provides free fresh fruits and vegetables to children at eligible elementary schools during the school day, to help introduce children to fresh fruits and vegetables. The program also promotes nutrition education.

**HEALTHY,
HUNGER-FREE
KIDS ACT
(HHFKA)**



The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act was the 2010 Child Nutrition Reauthorization. It authorized funding and set policy for the US Department of Agriculture's core child nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children , the Summer Food Service Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program. Among other things, the HHFKA required schools to implement local wellness policies and implemented stricter nutrition standards for school meals.

**IDENTIFIED STUDENT
PERCENTAGE
(ISP)**



The percentage of students directly certified as eligible for free meals. This percentage is used to reimburse schools that have adopted the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). The ISP must be greater than or equal to 40 percent for schools to qualify for CEP. The formula $ISP \times 1.6$ provides the percent of meals reimbursed at the free meal rate. The remaining meals are reimbursed at the paid meal rate. Schools with ISP greater than or equal to 62.5 percent are reimbursed for all meals at the free meal rate.

**LOCAL
EDUCATION
AGENCY
(LEA)**



A public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a State for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary schools or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a State, or for a combination of school districts or counties as are recognized in a State as an administrative agency for its public elementary schools or secondary schools.

**NATIONAL SCHOOL
LUNCH PROGRAM
(NSLP)**



A federally assisted meal program that provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children in public and nonprofit private schools and residential care institutions. The NSLP was established under the National School Lunch Act, signed by President Truman in 1946.

**SCHOOL BREAKFAST
PROGRAM
(SBP)**



A program that reimburses states to operate nonprofit breakfast programs in schools and residential childcare institutions. It is administered by the Food and Nutrition Service at the federal level and by state education agencies at the state level. Local school food authorities operate the program in schools. The SBP started as a pilot in 1966 and was made permanent by Congress in 1975.

**SCHOOL FOOD
AUTHORITY**
(SFA)



The governing body which is responsible for the administration of one or more schools, and has legal authority to operate the National School Lunch Program or School Breakfast Program

**SCHOOL HEALTH
ADVISORY COUNCIL**
(SHAC)



An advisory group composed of individuals selected primarily from the health and education segments of the community. The group acts collectively in providing advice to the school system on aspects of the school health programs. The members of the council are appointed by the school system to advise the school system.

**SCHOOL MEAL
REIMBURSEMENT**



The federal cash payments to School Food Authorities for meals served.

**SCHOOL NUTRITION
ACCOUNT**



An individual student's account to which their school meal purchases are charged.

**SCHOOL NUTRITION
PROGRAM**
(SNR)



Programs that offer food and nutrition assistance for children, including the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program.

**SEAMLESS
SUMMER
OPTION**
(SSO)



A federal program that allows schools participating in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program to serve meals free of charge to children and teens through age 18 during school summer vacation periods. Meals are reimbursed at the free rates, which are slightly lower than the Summer Food Service Program rates.

**SPECIAL MILK
PROGRAM**
(SMP)



A federal program that provides milk to children in schools, childcare institutions, and eligible camps that do not participate in other child nutrition meal service programs, including half-day pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs. Milk served is reimbursed. The program was authorized in 1955.

**SUMMER FOOD
SERVICE
PROGRAM**
(SFSP)



A federally-funded, state-administered program that reimburses program operators who serve free healthy meals and snacks to children and teens through age 18 in low-income areas over the summer when school is not in session. The program was authorized in 1975.

**SUPPLEMENTAL
NUTRITION
ASSISTANCE
PROGRAM**

(SNAP)



SNAP provides nutrition benefits to supplement the food budget of needy families so they can purchase healthy food

**TEMPORARY
ASSISTANCE FOR
NEEDY FAMILIES**

(TANF)



A program that provides states and territories with flexibility in operating programs designed to help low-income families with children achieve economic self-sufficiency. States use TANF to fund monthly cash assistance payments to low-income families with children, as well as a wide range of services.

WAIVER



A request to allow specific flexibilities in the meal pattern, distribution, or other regulated aspect of a child nutrition program.

Champion Spotlights & Legislative Drops



Below are examples of Champion Spotlights. These Spotlights are posted on social media, so they're a great way to share why you joined the SMFANC movement with the community and your network!

The next few pages include examples of Legislative Drops, which are printed Champion stories that can be distributed to legislators at the NC General Assembly and elected officials at town hall events.

School Meals for All NC: Champion Spotlight

Toby Hedgepeth

Parent, Pastor, and Advocate

Hometown:
Greensboro, NC

Why I got involved with School Meals for All NC:
I got involved with School Meals for All NC because, as a child, I understood what it felt like to be hungry. And, as an adult, I understand the responsibility is mine to ensure children aren't hungry.

As much as I am able to use my voice, my vote, and my time for a cause that brings great change, I will. Every time.

Fun Fact:
I am an avid reader, and I read 13 books in the month of July!



School Meals for All NC: Champion Spotlight

Scotty Brooks

Oxford Board of Commissioners

Hometown:
Oxford, NC

Why I got involved with School Meals for All NC:
I got involved because of ALL the causes one can be a part of, THIS is of the utmost importance in regards to the educational welfare of our children in NC. We all know that hunger impacts the mind, body, and spirit more than most factors, and it has been proven that a hungry body inhibits learning and focus. IF we can feed our children when they are in school, they stand a far greater opportunity to be successful in the classroom and life.

Fun Fact:
I'm an avid sneaker collector with over 150 pairs, a passion passed down to my daughter!



School Meals for All NC: Champion Spotlight

Allison Vick

Chef/Owner,
Little Blue Macaron + Little Blue Bakehouse

Hometown:
Raleigh, NC

Why I got involved with School Meals for All NC:
My son attended a school providing no-cost breakfast and lunch for all students. But, I learned that is not the case for all schools. Through SMFA NC, we can make sure healthy school meals are for ALL students.

After working with the James Beard Foundation on food policy/advocacy and legislator meetings, I knew I was in the right place with this movement!

Fun Fact:
I'm an avid mushroom forager. I started during the pandemic. Now it's a bit of an obsession.



School Meals for All NC: Champion Spotlight

Pastor Steve Hargrove

Pastor, White Rock Missionary Baptist Church

Hometown:
Bullock, NC native living in Henderson, NC

Why I got involved with School Meals for All NC:
I value and support the importance of ALL children receiving "no-cost" breakfast and lunch in schools. Healthy eating supports both physical and emotional well-being. No child should be denied meals in school due to socio-economic status.

I gladly got involved because it is my belief that school meals for all enriches the learning environment.

Fun Fact:
I sing, play the piano, and direct choirs!





Guilford County

WHY I BECAME A
**School Meals
FOR ALL NC
CHAMPION**

Monique Nicholson's Story

We expect children to sit still, focus, behave, and learn while their stomachs are growling. As adults, we know how hard it is to concentrate when we're hungry, yet we expect children to do just that. Hunger impacts our emotions, ability to concentrate, and ability to learn. No child should be expected to succeed on an empty stomach. However, for many children, that is their daily reality.

Growing up, my parents led by example. They believed in helping their community and speaking up when something wasn't right to be a part of necessary change. No one should have to be hungry, especially children. My parents taught me that even if an issue doesn't directly affect me, it still matters because it affects someone else. Now as a parent myself, I strive to be that same example for my daughter. I've seen firsthand the impact food insecurity can have on a child's ability to learn and thrive. Every morning, my daughter heads off to school with the hope that her day will be filled with opportunity – a different reality than many other children in North Carolina. I'll be frank, until my daughter started kindergarten, I was oblivious to how many children experience hunger during the school day. It began with classroom snack calendars and I noticed the same students were unable to bring snacks when it was their turn. Quietly, I began dropping off extras. As my daughter progressed through elementary school, there were times she would ask me to pack her an extra lunch. She started noticing that a classmate would only have a few items for their lunch, if anything. This sparked honest, difficult conversations about inequality, food insecurity, and what it means to use your voice for those who may feel unheard. One of my proudest moments as a parent was watching her take that understanding and speak at a Board of Education meeting in 5th grade, advocating for children with school lunch debt. She is in the 7th grade now and I still remind her that we must use our voice to make a difference, even if the issue isn't ours directly.



Guilford County

WHY I BECAME A

**School Meals
FOR ALL NC
CHAMPION**

Monique Nicholson's Story

The simple act of having access to a nutritious meal can make all the difference in a child's focus and overall well-being. That's why I became a SMFANC (School Meals for All North Carolina) Champion and am advocating for school meals for all—because no child should have to learn on an empty stomach. It's not just about filling a meal tray; it's about giving every child the chance to succeed, regardless of their background or circumstances. We must unite as a community to ensure that every child has access to no-cost school meals because it is our shared responsibility to advocate for our children. It's mind-boggling that more than 30 years after I left school, we're still debating whether children should have access to free school meals. As my daughter shared in her speech to the Board of Education, the shame of school meal debt can lead to bullying and self-harm. We must remember that all of it stems from circumstances these children can't control.

We cannot expect students to thrive academically, socially, or emotionally on an empty stomach. By ensuring free meals for all students, we remove one more barrier standing in the way of their potential. Every child deserves to move through their school day full, focused, and ready to learn. These children are our future and together, we can make this a reality for all children in North Carolina.

– Monique Nicholson is a Parent Advocate and Care Coordinator and Speech Language Pathologist who lives in Greensboro, NC.



Granville County



WHY I BECAME A School Meals FOR ALL NC CHAMPION

Franthia McKoy's Story

I first became aware of chronic hunger when I was in high school. At first, I didn't understand why some students paid for lunch while others didn't. It quickly became clear that the difference was financial. That socioeconomic divide showed up every day in the cafeteria—and it's something I've never forgotten.

As I navigate my long-time career as an educator, I continue to witness how a lack of access to food affects students' mood and behavior. Too many children, through no fault of their own, rely on school meals as their primary source of nourishment. Yet some go without eating because they can't afford meals or feel embarrassed about qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Bringing a packed lunch from home isn't financially possible for many families, so students often sit in the lunchroom without food just to avoid being singled out. Stigma and financial hardship cannot continue to stand in the way of a nourished mind and body.

Currently, my sons attend a public school that does not offer no-cost meals for all. While we are fortunate enough to afford their school meals, it doesn't come without challenges. Each week, we add money to their accounts through a digital platform that charges a convenience fee. The cost of school meals has steadily increased, and sometimes my sons end up buying snacks instead—either because they don't like the food or the cafeteria runs out of meals before they get a chance to eat.

Students struggle to focus, participate, and stay engaged on empty stomachs. I've seen children act out, shut down, or suffer in silence simply because they're hungry. No-cost school meals remove stigma, reduce food insecurity, and ensure that every student can eat, regardless of their circumstances. It's not just a meal—it's a foundation for learning, growth, and a child's overall well-being.

This is a fixable problem.



Guilford County

WHY I BECAME A

**School Meals
FOR ALL NC**
CHAMPION

Chanel Jones's Story

2025 Burroughs Welcome Fund
Piedmont-Triad Teacher of the Year

Every day, students sit in my classroom trying to focus on lessons, but their minds are elsewhere – distracted by the growling of empty stomachs. As a proud middle school teacher, I've come to realize that academic struggles often have a much deeper root cause than poor grades or lack of effort. The true barrier to success for many of my students isn't their intelligence; they're simply hungry. No-cost school meals aren't just a perk, they're a game-changer for a child's mental health and ability to thrive in school. If we're not feeding kids in school, we're setting kids up for failure before they even open a textbook.

I teach in the same district that raised me. Here is where my teachers, bus drivers, and cafeteria workers once nurtured me with not only knowledge but also kindness, care, and hot meals. Now, I strive to offer my students the same.

I care deeply about the mission of School Meals for All NC because I've seen firsthand how hunger hides behind bright smiles and heavy bookbags. I've had students ask for seconds at breakfast, not out of greed, but because that tray of food might be their most substantial meal until the next school day. I've quietly packed extra snacks in their bags. I've watched them sit with empty stomachs and full hearts, trying to push through math problems and social studies discussions, despite the physical toll of hunger.

While I lost my mother at the age of five, my father was our rock. He worked hard to make sure my brother and I always had meals on the table. No matter how tight things got, he never let us feel the sting of hunger. He gave us dignity through the simple, powerful act of provision. I carry that spirit with me now. When I fight for school meals for all, I think of him. I think of the quiet pride he had when serving us dinner. I think of how many students don't have that assurance when they go home.



Guilford County

WHY I BECAME A



School Meals FOR ALL NC CHAMPION

Chanel Jones's Story

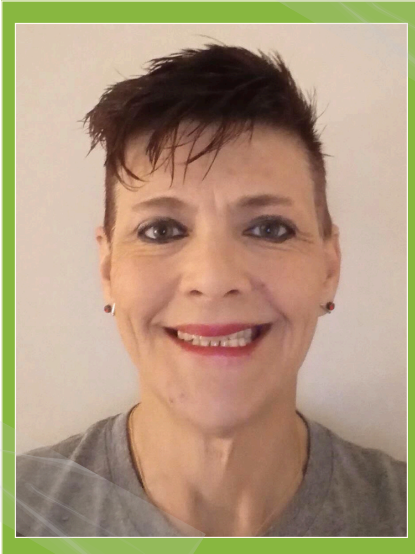
2025 Burroughs Welcome Fund
Piedmont-Triad Teacher of the Year

No student should be forced to carry the invisible weight of whether they can afford school meals alongside the visible weight of their education. When we eliminate the cost of meals, we remove the shame, the stigma, and the barriers that separate students who have from those who do not.

I've been a teacher for nearly a decade, but I've been aware of food insecurity for much longer. While I was blessed to grow up in a home where my father always made sure we had meals on the table, I saw friends, classmates, and neighbors who didn't have that same certainty. Even as a child, I noticed the quiet cues, students asking their classmates, "Are you going to eat that?" or offering to throw away someone's tray just to take what was left. I was raised in a community where schools did more than just teach – they nourished, supported, and protected. That legacy of care lives in me today. My classroom is more than a space to learn; it's a place to feel seen, heard, and safe.

To the public, policymakers, and anyone who believes in equity: food is not a privilege, it's a right. And if we want our schools to truly be the great equalizer, then feeding every child, no matter their ZIP code or family income, must be non-negotiable.

This isn't just about physical nourishment; it's about providing the foundation for mental well-being. When students have the food they need, they are more likely to focus, feel secure, and engage with their peers, manage stress, and perform academically. No-cost school meals aren't just a financial burden lifted from families—they are a critical investment in the emotional and academic success of our future leaders. It's time we recognized this, not just as a policy issue, but as a moral imperative. This isn't charity, it's dignity, and I'm standing for it because all students deserve it.



Haywood County

WHY I BECAME A
**School Meals
FOR ALL NC
CHAMPION**

Mary Beth Cochran's Story

My name is Mary Beth Cochran and I am raising four grandkids jointly with their aunt. We are on a fixed income, which means I cannot always send my grandchildren to school with breakfast or packed lunches. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was amazing to get free school lunches delivered to our home because without them, I don't know what we would do.

I live in an area where, for many families, the school meals may be a child's only access to food. All of my grandkids qualify to receive free breakfast and lunch at school, and it gives me peace of mind to know they at least have two balanced meals five days a week. This lets them learn with full tummies during the school day. School meals have played an important role for many generations in my family. As a child, I received free lunch in school, as did children, and for the past 10 years, so have my grandkids.

Though 'qualifying' for free school meals may read as a misfortune, I do consider us to be some of the lucky few with access to them. For families with incomes that fall right outside of the bracket, reduced-cost meals may still be too costly and result in a child running into student meal debt. Even a higher-earning family that pays for full-price school meals can run into trouble one day and no longer afford the expense.

This is why I support School Meals for All NC, an initiative working to ensure that every child in every public school in North Carolina has access to breakfast and lunch at school at no cost to their families.

All children need the nourishment to be able to concentrate in school. As the future leaders of our world, we should do everything possible to help them succeed.



Dare County

WHY I BECAME A
**School Meals
FOR ALL NC
CHAMPION**

Christie Baer's Story

Hi there,

I am Christie Baer, a lifelong Dare County Resident and a mom of two girls. My oldest daughter has graduated from Manteo Schools, but I still have a second grader at Manteo Elementary School. In September 2024, I saw a social media post made about a high school student who had his tray taken from him in the lunchroom because his school meal debt reached \$10. For this academic year in Dare County, "middle and high schools will introduce a revised meal charge policy concerning student meal debt. A maximum charge limit of \$10 will be implemented."

This was appalling to me; how were we taking food from children and throwing it away because of \$10? In the days after seeing this post, I decided that this was not something I would let slide through the cracks. Our students are our future leaders. All children and students alike deserve a hot meal throughout the day. The school meal may be the only meal they get. In turn, I wonder about the message we are sending to our students by taking a tray of hot food that is now contaminated and throwing it in the trash can. It still costs the school money and time.

As I started researching and looking into different avenues to help, I came across School Meals for All NC. I began emailing our Board of Education and Dare County Commissioners, most of whom responded, including our superintendent.

In doing my research, I discovered that one in our district already had free breakfast and lunch, Hatteras. How were the others forgotten? I attended a Board of Education (BOE) meeting along with other community supporters. It was at this meeting that I garnered quite a bit of support from most BOE members, with one member making a motion to approve 30 days of free breakfast and lunch for all students in Dare County until a more permanent solution could be found. This motion passed.



Dare County

WHY I BECAME A
**School Meals
FOR ALL NC
CHAMPION**
Christie Baer's Story

From there, the commissioners quickly jumped on board, after all it was an election year. With help from the county commissioners, the BOE passed free meals for all students in Dare County beyond the 30 days.

It should not have taken a hungry child to realize that this happens in every school, every day. Growing up, I was one of those children who got reduced lunch; we were a family with four children and making four school lunches at home every day is difficult.

Dare County is one of the richest counties in North Carolina, but many of our residents are not. The median income is just over \$60,000 for a family of 4. This puts most families over the threshold to qualify for any help for free and reduced meals. These are children, and the parents' actions should not reflect upon them. I am thankful for the community that supported me, the BOE members who strongly supported feeding our students, and the county commissioners who made it happen. Our students are our future; a hungry child can not think or learn.



CONTACT US

- Champion Program Email:
 - smfa@centerforblackhealth.org
- Ambassadors Program Email:
 - abc2nc2org@gmail.com
- Leadership Team Email:
 - info@schoolmealsforallinc.org
- Recommended Reading & Learning
 - Advocacy Guide

