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# State Universal Meals Policies Can Strengthen A Just and Resilient Local Food System

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## Summary

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government allowed schools to provide meals at no charge to all children as a temporary emergency measure. Recognizing the beneficial impacts of universal meals, at least 14 states have introduced legislation to continue universal meals after this federal support ended in June 2022.

As of 2022, six states have enacted universal meals, three of which incorporated universal meals as a permanent policy. States that have introduced universal meals also tend to have a high involvement in local food legislation. 10 of the 14 states that have introduced universal meals legislation (79%) have also enacted at least one policy that supports local food purchasing. For example, two-thirds of states with enacted universal meals legislation also have local purchasing incentive programs.

These kinds of policies are mutually beneficial: school meals for all gives access to local food for more children while providing school nutrition directors the stable revenue and streamlined administration that lets them focus on building connections with local producers. Several of these policies have provisions that support additional values, such as local purchasing from BIPOC and other emerging producers as well as farmers that use climate-smart growing practices. Farm to school programs like these empower school nutrition professionals to make purchases based on values, rather than based solely on cost and convenience. Supporting universal meals can strengthen a just and resilient food system.

As of Dec. 2022:

**14**  
**states**  
have introduced  
universal meals  
legislation

**6**  
**states**  
have enacted  
universal meals, and  
half of these are  
permanent policies

**79%**  
**of these states**  
have also enacted  
policies that  
support local  
food purchasing

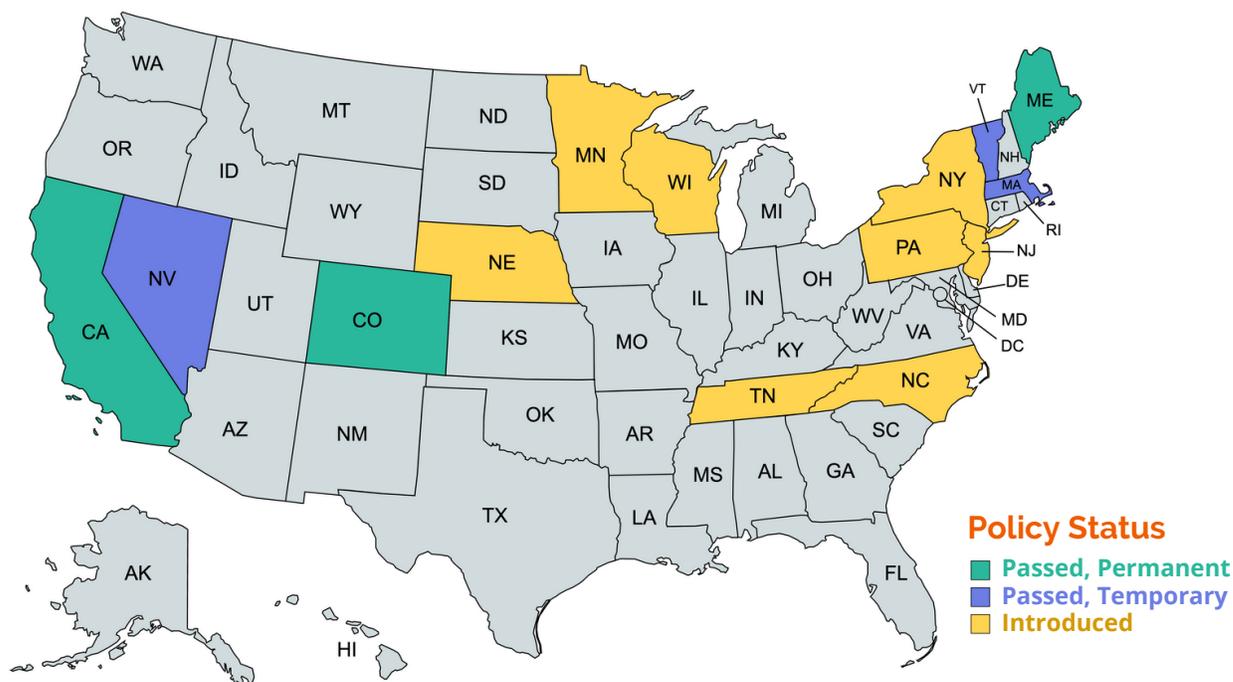
# The School Meals Campaign: **Who's At the Table?**

The COVID-19 pandemic radically shifted how child nutrition programs operate, with school nutrition professionals working tirelessly to feed kids under emergency conditions with limited resources. Before the pandemic, only certain income-eligible students received free or reduced-price meals, but this was restrictive and never provided meals to all in need. The pandemic also highlighted the urgency of moving toward a more resilient local food supply that builds racial and social equity. We need a system of school meals that serves all kids and values the people who get it to the table.

That's why National Farm to School Network advocates for universal meals focused on equity for the most impacted stakeholders across the food system. NFSN created the **Who's At The Table?** School Meals campaign to provide tools to communicate how our shared community values have the potential to radically transform our food system for the better. We provide resources to advocate for values-aligned universal meals policies. **[Learn more about this campaign here.](#)**

## State Universal Meals Policies

### Map of States with Universal Meals Legislation by Status

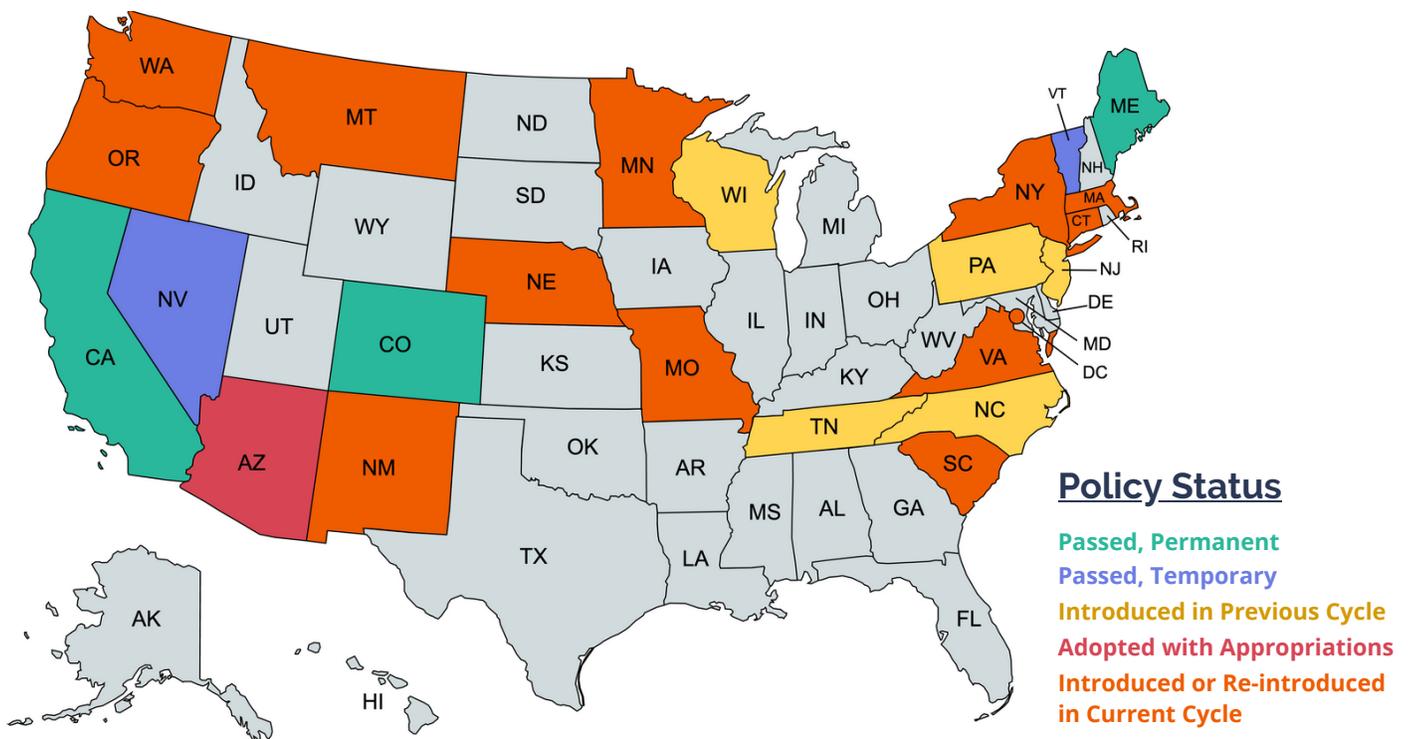


As of the end of 2022, at least 14 states have introduced universal meals legislation. Six states have enacted universal meals, three of which incorporated universal meals as a permanent policy. The map above highlights these states and their policy status. There are many other states with legislation that expands access to school meals, but they are not mentioned in this summary.

# Update: Current Session Universal Meals Policy

National Farm to School Network has continued tracking universal meals policies since this report was released in December 2022. In the first weeks of the new legislative session, state-level universal meals policies swept the nation. As of **January 19, 2023, at least 23 states and the District of Columbia have introduced policies** to advance free, healthy school meals for all students. That's nearly half of all states, representing **52%** of all U.S. children (under 18). Nine states and the District of Columbia are new to introduce legislation in 2023, where two states have re-introduced universal meals this legislative cycle. Arizona is an exception, as its universal meals policy was funded through appropriations. Massachusetts has introduced legislation to make its current universal meals policy permanent. Some of these policies, for example New Mexico's [NM SB 4](#), directly support local food purchasing.

## State Universal Meals Policies As of January 19, 2023



[Click on the links below for bill language / more information](#)

[Arizona](#)

[California](#)

[Colorado](#)

[Connecticut](#)

[D.C.](#)

[Maine](#)

[Massachusetts](#)

[Minnesota](#)

[Missouri](#)

[Montana](#)

[Nebraska](#)

[Nevada](#)

[New Jersey](#)

[New Mexico](#)

[New York](#)

[North Carolina](#)

[Oregon](#)

[Pennsylvania](#)

[South Carolina](#)

[Tennessee](#)

[Vermont](#)

[Virginia](#)

[Washington](#)

[Wisconsin](#)

## Table of States with Universal Meals Policies by Status (Dec 2022)

Status	State	Bill(s)	Notes
<b>Passed, Permanent</b>	California	<a href="#"><u>CA AB 558</u></a> <a href="#"><u>CA AB 130</u></a>	Enacted July 9, 2021
	Colorado	<a href="#"><u>CO HB 22-1414</u></a>	Public ballot vote passed on Nov. 8, 2022
	Maine	<a href="#"><u>ME SP 540</u></a> <a href="#"><u>ME LD 221</u></a>	Enacted July 1, 2021
<b>Passed, Temporary*</b>	Massachusetts	<a href="#"><u>Bill H.5050</u></a>	Budget appropriations expands universal meals for the 2022-23 SY; <a href="#"><u>MA H 714</u></a> & <a href="#"><u>MA S 314</u></a> are pending
	Nevada	Interim Finan Com. Doc <a href="#"><u>No. 27744</u></a>	Expands universal meals for the 2022-23 SY
	Vermont	<a href="#"><u>VT S 100</u></a>	Enacted May 12, 2022; Expands universal meals until July 1, 2023
<b>Introduced</b>	Minnesota	<a href="#"><u>MN SF 4477</u></a>	Introduced Apr 6, 2022; Referred to Education Finance and Policy
	Nebraska	<a href="#"><u>NE LB117</u></a>	Introduced Jan 7, 2021; Hearing held on Feb 02, 2021; Indefinitely postponed
	New Jersey	<a href="#"><u>NJ S 1508</u></a>	Feb 10, 2022; Referred to Senate Environment and Energy Com.; Transferred to Senate Education Com. March 8, 2022
	New York	<a href="#"><u>NY S 9144</u></a> <a href="#"><u>NY A 9518</u></a>	Introduced May 11, 2022; Referred to Education Committee May 11, 2022
	North Carolina	<a href="#"><u>NC HB 1074</u></a>	Introduced May 26, 2022; Passed 1st Reading, Ref. to the Com. on Finance May 27, 2022
	Pennsylvania	<a href="#"><u>PA SB 1327</u></a>	Introduced Sep 13, 2022; Referred to Education Committee same day; PA Currently has free breakfast program for 2022-23 SY
	Tennessee	<a href="#"><u>TN SB 1897</u></a>	Introduced Jan 13, 2022; Passed K-12 Subcommittee and Education Administration Committee; Referred to Finance, Ways, and Means Committee April 6, 2022
	Wisconsin	<a href="#"><u>WI AB 805</u></a>	Introduced Jan 4, 2022; Read and referred to Committee on Education; Fiscal estimate received; Failed to pass pursuant to Senate Joint Resolution 1 on March 15, 2022

\*Connecticut implemented universal meals in the first few weeks of the 2022-23 SY until a \$30 million pool of American Rescue Plan Act funds was exhausted.

# States with Universal Meals Policies are **Already** Supporting Local Food Purchasing

- **10 of the 14 states** that have introduced universal meals legislation (79%) have also enacted at least one policy that **supports local food purchasing**.
- **Two-thirds of states** with enacted universal meals legislation also **have local purchasing incentive programs**.
- **Two-thirds of states** with enacted universal meals legislation have established legislation that either declares a local purchasing goal for the state or allows school districts to legally prioritize local food when purchasing from vendors.
- **Most states** (57%) that have introduced universal meals legislation **have also enacted grant programs** that support the purchasing, processing, and serving of local food.

## The Intersection of Local Purchasing & Universal Meals Policies

Enacted Local Purchasing Policies 2002-2020 <small>from <a href="#">State Policy Handbook</a></small>	States with Universal Meals Legislation													
	Passed						Introduced							
	CA	CO	ME	MA	NV	VT	MN	NE	NY	NJ	NC	PA	TN	WI
<b>Incentives</b>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓					
<b>Grant Programs</b>	✓	✓				✓	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓
<b>Preferences &amp; Goals</b>		✓	✓	✓		✓			✓					

## Definitions: Policies that Support Local and/or Values-Based Purchasing

<b>Funded Local Purchasing Incentives</b>	Local purchasing incentives provide schools additional money to include local foods in school meals. For example, Vermont provides an additional <u>25 cents per meal</u> for any school that <u>purchased 25%</u> of its ingredients from local producers.
<b>Funded State Farm to School Grant Programs</b>	These policies authorize grants to support farm to school activities. We identified only grant programs that support local food purchasing capacity like kitchen staff training, equipment to process, prepare, and serve local ingredients, or coordinators to connect producers and institutions.
<b>Local Purchasing Preferences &amp; Goals</b>	Local preference laws make it easier for schools to purchase local foods and direct schools to purchase locally whenever possible. Local purchasing goals establish a percentage of local ingredients that schools should be serving in meals. For example, Maine has <u>enacted a goal</u> that their state institutions purchase at least 20% “good, local food” local by 2025.

# Going Beyond Local: Values-Aligned Purchasing



As advocates continue to push for a **federal** universal meals policy, **states** have the power to also introduce legislation to support their students in the interim. States that have introduced universal meals policy tend to have high involvement in supporting local food purchasing. This may be because states that already have a strong coalition of local food advocates can be easily activated to support universal meals. Policymakers who already understand the importance of school food as a bedrock for social change will be more likely to support expanding access for all children.

At National Farm to School Network, we believe in the transformative power of universal school meals coupled with purchasing that invests in our shared community values. Several states go above and beyond supporting **local** purchases and include **additional values** directly in their bill language.

## Policy Spotlight: New York's "Best Value" Law and "Good Food NY" Bill



In 2012, Section 163.1(j) of New York State's Finance Law was changed to allow schools to award contracts based on their value, and not solely based on their price. This means that the basis for awarding contracts for services can prioritize non-monetary factors like quality and responsibility of vendors.

In 2021, Senator Hinchey introduced the first-of-its-kind Good Food NY Bill, which institutes a framework for schools to give preference to items that cost 10% more if they align with values of sustainability, racial equity, a valued workforce, farmers first, animal welfare, and nutrition.

## Policy Spotlight: Incentive Programs Support Emerging Farmers

California and Minnesota both have local purchasing incentives in which schools must first apply in order to be considered for the program. These states give priority to applicants that pledge to purchase from emerging producers such as women, veterans, persons with disabilities, Native American/Alaskan Native, communities of color, young and beginning farmers, and LGBTQ+ farmers. California's incentive grant program also prioritizes applicants who plan to purchase from producers with climate-smart agricultural practices.

## Connecting Universal Meals, Local Food, and Values-Based Purchasing Creates a Just and Resilient Food System



Not all local purchasing policies are explicit in supporting procurement that aligns with the National Farm to School Network's shared community values (outlined above). However, these are not inherently separate goals. Farm to school programs can act as a precursor for values-aligned purchasing. For example, school nutrition professionals who are actively engaged in farm to school gain skills in developing bid language that gives preference to local food, partnering with local producers in their area, and cooking ingredients from scratch. School nutrition professionals that are already equipped with these skills are much more likely to advance an agenda, such as racial equity, in their purchasing than those that only purchase lowest-cost products from broadline vendors.

There is a high potential for co-benefits between values-aligned purchasing, local food purchasing, and universal meals. In states with local food purchasing policies, there is already a coalition of advocates in place that work together to change laws for the better. If we form a broader coalition that promotes the health of all school children while strengthening and empowering the producers, workers, educators, and their communities who make up that system, our policies have a much more likelihood of success. Parents, farmers, and educators can all ensure this issue is at the top of the policy agenda. By supporting a just and equitable food system, we allow everyone at the table to thrive.

**Join us as we  
reimagine the future.**

**Learn More &  
Get Involved**

