

New Bedford Public Schools to offer universal free breakfast and lunch next year

Beginning next year, breakfast and lunch will be available daily to every student in the New Bedford Public Schools at no charge, regardless of family income levels. The school district has been selected to participate in a new federal program designed to serve more nutritious meals and save families money.

The “Community Eligibility Option” waives meal fees for all children and eliminates the need for families to submit any financial eligibility forms. Massachusetts was one of 10 states, along with the District of Columbia, to pilot the program last year. It is now available nationwide to communities that meet eligibility requirements.

“In order to achieve academically, our students need full access to a healthy breakfast and lunch,” said Dr. Pia Durkin, Superintendent. “We are so pleased to offer universal free meals in every one of our schools, while eliminating the burden of proof for our low-income families.”

The district currently offers universal free breakfast at the elementary level. Beginning in September, free breakfast and lunch will be available to all elementary, middle, and high school students. Lunch also will be provided at no cost to all students in the following private schools: All Saints, First Church of the Nazarene, Holy Family Holy Name, St. Francis Xavier, and Nativity Preparatory School.

About 75% of the approximately 13,600 students enrolled in the New Bedford Public Schools and the five participating private schools are currently eligible for free (about 9,100 students) or reduced-price (about 730 students) meals. Students who do

not meet financial eligibility guidelines, or who do not submit the required paperwork, currently pay \$2.00 for lunch at the elementary level, or \$2.25 at middle and high school. This year alone, families have paid approximately \$400,000 in school meal charges citywide. Individual families could save up to \$400 annually per child.

The program is administered at no additional cost to the school district. In fact, Nancy Carvalho, Director of Food Service, expects the program to generate additional revenue for the New Bedford Public Schools, given the likely increase in participation. All meals served in schools are eligible for federal reimbursement.

Ms. Carvalho noted that students will continue to have the option to pay a small fee for additional food and some snacks.