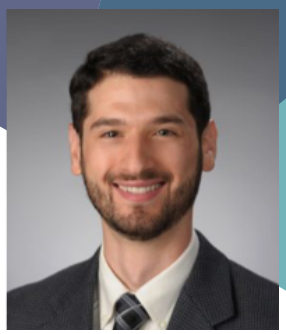
RIDGE PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

Universal Free Meals (UFM) raises student test scores in New York

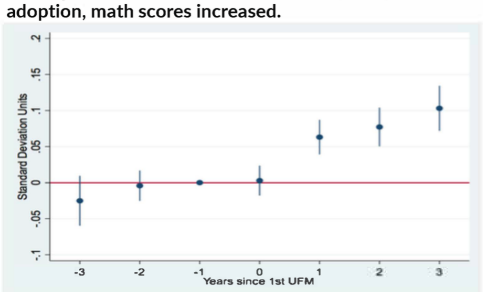


Universal Free Meals helps improve educational outcomes for middle school students in New York City, according to new research by Michah W. Rothbart and Amy Ellen Schwartz of the Maxwell School of Syracuse University.

Providing all students breakfast and lunch at no cost, or Universal Free Meals (UFM), eliminates the financial barrier to student participation in the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Increased school meal participation has the potential to benefit students through improved healthier food access and school districts through streamlined administration and increased revenue. **Michah W. Rothbart**, a 2017 grantee of the Tufts/UConn RIDGE Program, leverages city and state administrative data to uncover the impact of UFM on both students and districts in New York.

In their first paper, **Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance**, Michah W. Rothbart and co-author Amy Ellen Schwartz use longitudinal student data from New York City public schools to estimate the effect of UFM on obesity and academic achievement. They find positive effects of UFM on middle school students, including significant increased school lunch participation, improved English language arts and math test scores, and suggestive evidence of improved weight outcomes, especially among non-poor students.

In the years after Universal Free Meals (UFM) adoption, math scores increased.



UFM adoption has increased in part due to the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), authorized in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which allows low-income schools to offer breakfast and lunch to all enrolled students without collecting household applications. Exploring statewide expansion of UFM, the authors' second paper, **Do Universal Free Meals Reduce Obesity and Who Pays for It? Evidence from Community Eligibility Provision**, exploits the timing of district CEP adoption in New York state. Aligned with their previous findings, they find that CEP increases SBP and NSLP participation and decreases obesity in older grades. Fiscally, for CEP-adopting districts, increases in federal food service revenues are greater than decreases in local food services revenues from no longer collecting meal fees, and expenditures per meal decrease indicating economic returns to scale.

Future research coming out of the grant will explore barriers to school meal participation, in spite of UFM adoption, due to physical space constraints such as school overcrowding. "The funding from RIDGE helped my coauthors and I make substantial progress in understanding the effects of universal free school meals programs and has led to a very productive line of research," said Rothbart.

Schwartz, A. E. and Rothbart, M. W. (2019), Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance. J. Pol. Anal. Manage.. doi: 10.1002/pam.22175

Rothbart, M. W., Schwartz, A. E., and Gutierrez, E., Do Universal Free Meals Reduce Obesity and Who Pays for It? Evidence from Community Eligibility Provision. *working paper in press*

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