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**NM students to get free meals through December**  
*USDA extends program due to COVID-19 pandemic*

SANTA FE -- New Mexico school children will eat for free through December under a decision announced last week by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Schools may continue serving free meals to all children through the end of the year or until funding runs out, the federal agency said in a news release, reversing an earlier decision to end the free summer feeding program when schools resumed in the fall.

"This is a huge relief for many New Mexico families who might not qualify for free meals but are still facing hard times because of this pandemic," said Public Education Secretary Ryan Stewart. "Now feeding their children is one less worry," he said.

Lawmakers on Aug. 15 asked the USDA to extend regulatory waivers to allow schools to serve meals to all children at no cost -- regardless whether they were enrolled or otherwise qualified for free lunch. Five days later, USDA denied the request, saying Congress had not authorized a universal school meals program.

The reversal came Aug. 31 in a news release and notifications sent to individual states, including New Mexico, granting waivers to regulations governing the Summer Food Service Program and the National School Lunch Program Seamless Summer Option.

In-person learning is not required to receive a school meal. Since schools closed in mid-March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, New Mexico schools have provided more than 13 million meals to children at grab-and-go sites or delivered by school bus drivers, and that will continue in districts that remain in remote learning.

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