



Changing Systems. Changing Lives.

Programs improve lives today. Policies create healthier communities for generations.

Wholespire continues to advance policies that create healthier learning environments where students have opportunities to thrive physically, mentally and academically. In 2026, our legislative work to make sure all public school students can receive a free breakfast focused on the budget process. Thanks to dedicated organizational partners, legislative champions, and our funders, all children in South Carolina are being offered a free breakfast this school year.

Free School Breakfast Campaign 2026: A Case Study

What Happened

Building on the CEP and meal-shaming protections in permanent law, Wholespire and allies pushed for a free school breakfast proposal in the FY2026-27 state budget. Governor Henry McMaster released his executive budget on January 11, including \$8.7M for free school breakfast. This inclusion highlighted successes in other states, particularly Arkansas, and helped build bipartisan support.

Initial lobbying activities focused on House Ways and Means and Senate Finance because these two committees are responsible for presenting their respective chambers a budget to vote on. During each chamber's budget-passing timeframe, the House included both the \$8.7M in funding and a proviso directing the state to fund any gaps in reimbursement to school districts for breakfast.

The Senate's first budget version included only \$1 for free school meals and no such proviso. But during the Senate budget debate, Senators Ott and Goldfinch authored a proviso that was critical to the long-term fight, which was to test whether or not such a proviso could survive the Senate's rules on amendments that are germane to the budget. The proviso survived that challenge, which ensured a pathway to passage if the budget conference report included the proviso. Getting both the funding increase and the proviso through the Senate was a critical win: it required experienced lobbyists working alongside legislative champions who understood exactly how to thread the increase and the proviso through Rule 24's procedural constraints. Ultimately, \$2.7M in recurring fund was allocated for the program and the proviso contained crucial language requiring the SC Department of Education to use carryover funds to close the gap between the \$2.7M and the full cost of covering breakfasts not reimbursed through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) (see April 22, 2026 Senate Journal). Using more up-to-date CEP enrollment figures, reflecting more schools participating in CEP than were available earlier in the year, the estimated cost was reduced from \$8.7M to less than \$5M.

Budget negotiations extended past the normal calendar, with a conference committee deal reached July 23, 2026, and the budget signed by the Governor on August 11, 2026, creating a supplemental statewide breakfast program starting 2026–27; because school started the same week, the impact was immediate.

What It Changed

- All students will be eligible for breakfast in school, offering nutritional benefits to just over 710,000 total students in traditional school districts
- South Carolina is the only state to make legislative changes for free school meals in 2026

Advocacy

In addition to bipartisan legislative support, a broad coalition of advocates across South Carolina backed the effort. Funding came from Solving Hunger South Carolina, the American Heart Association, and Sisters of Charity of South Carolina, with additional support from Wholespire, Palmetto State Teachers Association, faith-based groups, and other statewide partner organizations. Partnership, consistent communication, and message discipline across lobbyists, coalition partners, and an outside marketing firm carried the campaign from the previous policy wins through final passage of this year's budget.

Coalition Development:

- The formation of Solving Hunger SC, the state affiliate of the national Solving Hunger campaign, gave partners an independent website, social media presence, and platform, run by a separately funded marketing firm, to share campaign information outside of Wholespire's own channels.
- Regular meetings between the campaign's coordinating bodies, including lobbyists and the marketing firm, kept messaging cohesive and consistent throughout.

Testimony and Advocacy Days:

- Wholespire and its advocates testified before the Joint Citizens and Legislative Committee on Children in fall 2025, urging the committee to prioritize free school breakfast in 2026.
- Wholespire briefed advocates from partner organizations on campaign updates and helped prepare them to speak with legislators during State House visits. These partners (SC Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Save the Children Action Network, and the Institute for Child Success) each brought their own advocacy networks and hosted their own State House advocacy days.



Image: SC Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics Advocacy Day

Joint Letters:

- Wholespire organized a joint letter from 12 organizations thanking Governor McMaster for his support of free school breakfast.

- Wholespire organized a joint letter from 11 organizations urging the President of the Senate and Speaker of the House to employ their Members to support free school breakfast in the budget.
- Wholespire organized a joint letter from 14 organizations to the Budget Conferees urging the inclusion of funds in the final FY27 budget.
- Over 50 faith leaders, including members of the Christian Coalition, signed a separate letter of support.

May 29, 2026

The Honorable Harvey Peeler
The Honorable Tom Davis
The Honorable Brad Hutto

The Honorable Bruce Bannister
The Honorable Jackie Hayes
The Honorable Davey Hiott

Dear Budget Conference Committee Conferees,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations—each representing distinct networks of families, educators, health professionals, and community leaders across South Carolina—we respectfully urge you to include **full funding for free school breakfast for all K-12 students** in the final budget, beginning in the **2026–2027 school year**.

We are encouraged that both **Governor Henry McMaster's executive budget** and the **South Carolina House budget** include **\$8.7 million** to provide breakfast at no cost to families, as well as Proviso 1.103 that implements this program while remaining compliant with House and Senate rules. This modest investment would ensure students across our state can start the school day nourished and ready to learn. Evidence from South Carolina and around the country consistently shows that access to school breakfast improves attendance, academic performance, graduation rates, and classroom behavior, while also reducing stigma for students. Families benefit as well, saving hundreds of dollars per child each year—relief that is especially meaningful as household budgets remain strained.

Importantly, **South Carolina would not be alone** in taking this step. **Arkansas has moved forward with free school breakfast for students**, with **Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders publicly supporting school nutrition as part of a broader strategy to strengthen student learning and outcomes**. Arkansas's experience demonstrates that providing breakfast at school can be a practical, bipartisan solution focused squarely on helping children succeed—particularly in rural and high-need communities.

At a time when improving educational outcomes and workforce readiness is a shared priority, school breakfast represents a focused investment with proven returns, while accounting for a very small share of overall state revenue.

We respectfully urge you, as conferees, to ensure the **final budget includes the full \$8.7 million investment** for free school breakfast as well as the House version of Proviso 1.103. This decision would affirm South Carolina's commitment to educational opportunity, child wellbeing, and commonsense solutions that support students, families, and schools statewide.

Thank you for your service and for carefully considering this request. We appreciate your leadership and your dedication to the children of South Carolina.

Sincerely,



Image: Example of one of the joint letters sent to leadership and all legislators.

Media Advocacy

- A press release thanking the Governor generated media calls to Wholespire and resulted in multiple published stories (see media list).
- Advocates wrote letters to the editor, building local-level awareness and support among families. (see media list)
- Wholespire and Solving Hunger SC thanked legislators who voted for free breakfast via social media, first after each chamber's budget vote, then again after final approval in August. The analytics of legislators' posts were shared with them to communicate the constituent support for free breakfast.
- Solving Hunger SC engaged in paid media advertising in key legislative districts.



Image: Example of Facebook post created for each legislator voting for free breakfast in their Chamber's budget.



Wholespire

Published by Meg Porter Stanley · August 18 at 10:31AM ·



Thank you, President Alexander!



Solving Hunger SC

August 18 at 9:02 AM ·

Because of leaders like President Alexander, more students across South Carolina will start their mornings with a nutritious meal. Thank you for supporting full school breakfast funding.

Image: Example of Facebook posts for all legislators voting to pass the final state budget including free breakfast for public school students

Geofencing

- In December 2025, billboard trucks toured Senate districts during community holiday events to publicly thank legislators who had championed the issue earlier in the year, in hopes of securing their continued support moving into 2026.



Image: Truck driven around town on the day of the Bluffton Christmas Parade

Paid Lobbying

- Lobbyists being present and accountable throughout the campaign was essential for guiding the legislative process.
- Wholespire and Solving Hunger SC contracted with lobbyists who worked in tandem and met with the coordinating bodies weekly.

Press Coverage

Date:	January 12, 2026
Excerpt/ paraphrase:	"Eating breakfast improves their cognitive performance, attention, memory and behavior and thereby improving everything that happens in that classroom with their academic performance," McMaster told reporters Monday afternoon. McMaster's proposal only covers breakfast, but he would support universal free lunch for students in the future, he said. "I think the system would operate better if it were universal," McMaster said. "The cost is minimal compared to the positive impact." The proposal also sets aside \$8.7M to provide free school breakfast to every public school student, regardless of income.
Significance:	<i>The Governor's positioning of free breakfast as a marquee, headline-generating priority rather than a line buried in the budget with media exposure, gave momentum to the campaign during the first week of the legislative session.</i>
	<i>*Multiple media outlets carried the story:</i>

Outlet	Headline	Link
WLTX	McMaster proposes universal school breakfast, income tax cut, road investments in	https://www.wltx.com/article/news/local/mcmaster-budget-2026/101-cdffaa59-f272-44c2-836a-6bbbfab9b60c

	\$14 billion budget	
SC Public Radio	McMaster's budget proposes \$50K starting SC teacher pay, free school breakfast and growth study	https://www.southcarolinapublicradio.org/sc-news/2026-01-12/mcmasters-budget-proposes-50k-starting-sc-teacher-pay-free-school-breakfast-and-growth-study
WIS	Gov. Henry McMaster unveils 2026-27 executive budget	https://www.wistv.com/2026/01/12/live-gov-mcmaster-unveil-2026-27-executive-budget/
WACH	Gov. McMaster releases 2026-2027 executive budget	https://wach.com/news/local/gov-mcmaster-to-unveil-2026-2027-executive-budget-south-carolina-state-house-announcement-funding
WSPA	Gov. McMaster Releases Budget Recommendations	https://www.wspa.com/news/state-news/gov-mcmaster-releases-proposed-south-carolina-budget-for-2026/

The State	Free breakfast for all SC students proposed by Gov. McMaster. What would it cost?	https://www.thestate.com/news/politics-government/article314291854.html
Greenville News	What's in Gov. McMaster's 2026-27 budget proposal?	https://www.greenvilleonline.com/story/news/politics/2026/01/12/sc-governor-mcmaster-budget-proposal-roads-teacher-raises/88144103007/
The Dailey Gazette	SC governor's last budget continues push to raise teacher pay, keep tuition steady	https://scdailygazette.com/2026/01/13/sc-governors-last-budget-continues-push-to-raise-teacher-pay-keep-tuition-steady/
Queen City News	Governor Pushes for Universal Free School Breakfast	https://www.qcnews.com/news/u-s/south-carolina/sc-governor-pushes-for-universal-free-school-breakfast/ and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQyMV5POoAA

Date:	March 11, 2026
Outlet:	The State

Headline:	Free breakfast or gun safety? What provisions did SC House include in its budget?
Excerpt/Phrase:	Student getting a free breakfast ... among the provisions included (in) the spending plan adopted by the South Carolina state House members this week.
Significance:	.First line of story during the House budget debates..
Link:	https://www.thestate.com/news/politics-government/article314986233.html

Date:	April 27, 2026
Outlet:	WLTX
Headline:	SC Senate rejects free school breakfast proposal, House and Senate now at odds
Excerpt/Phrase:	"This is just as important as a computer that we may be giving them to do their work... this is like books, paper and pens..." "Can't address nutrition unless you first address hunger..."
Significance:	Chambers at odds, testing whether or not such a proviso could survive the Senate's rules on amendments that are germane to the budget. Media coverage helped spotlight the difference in perspectives.
Link:	https://www.wltx.com/video/news/politics/sc-senate-rejects-free-school-breakfast-proposal-house-and-senate-now-at-odds/101-c8ed8514-2bd1-40fd-a4f8-d2970bd2cfe4

Date:	August 18, 2026
Outlet:	The SC Dailey Gazette/ Anderson Observer
Headline:	Every SC student to get free breakfast with state funding: Legislators spent \$2.8 million to cover breakfasts not already included in a federal program.
Excerpt/Phrase:	The \$2.8 million included in the spending package that went into effect Monday is expected to cover the cost of breakfasts this school year for all students who don't already qualify under another program, regardless of their parents' income, according to the Department of Education. "Providing students with access to breakfast at school will help ensure they have the support they need to focus, learn, and succeed in the classroom," McMaster said in a statement to the SC Daily Gazette about the Legislature's designation.
Significance:	Public announcement that the effect was immediate.
Link:	https://scdailygazette.com/2026/08/18/every-sc-student-to-get-free-breakfast-with-state-funding/

Advocates Engaged in Writing Letters to Editorial Boards

Date:	January 26, 2026
Outlet:	The Dailey Gazette
Headline:	Children can't learn while hungry. I know because I was a constantly hungry child.

Excerpt/ paraphrase:	"Children are South Carolina's most valuable asset. Protecting their mental and physical well-being should never be controversial. When we feed children, we are not just addressing hunger, we are investing in education, health, and the future of our state."
Significance:	<i>Advocates become engaged with the announcement of the Governor's budget proposal to include \$8.7M for free school breakfast.</i>
Link:	https://scdailygazette.com/2026/01/27/children-cant-learn-while-hungry-i-know-because-i-was-a-constantly-hungry-child/

Date:	February 1, 2026
Outlet:	Post & Courier
Headline:	Support free breakfast, allow full practice authority, trust the science
Excerpt/ paraphrase:	"As conversations around budgets and policies continue, I want to voice my support for Gov. Henry McMaster's proposal to provide funding for free breakfast for all children in SC public schools." "This isn't just about food. It's about dignity, equity and the quiet ways we show our children that they matter."
Significance:	Advocate with personal lived experience engagement.
Link:	https://www.postandcourier.com/opinion/letters_to_editor/letters-free-breakfast-full-practice-authority-trust-science/article_d9f7451b-d101-4914-b891-2c456c036637.html