

Expanding School Nutrition Programs to Reduce Child Hunger in North Carolina

Every day, 27% of students in North Carolina's public schools struggle with hunger; this is higher than the national average of 22%. Nearly 880,000 students qualify for free or reduced-price meal benefits which means they live in households where the family income is at 185% of poverty or below. Students from low-income households are often considered to be "food insecure" which means there are times when there is little or no food in the household which results in disrupted eating patterns and limited access to food, ultimately leading to chronic, persistent hunger. Healthy, nutritious, appealing, affordable school meals support students' optimal growth, development, well-being and academic success.

Here are the facts*:

- ✓ 73% of teachers and principals see students who regularly come to school hungry
- ✓ 87% of principals say they see hungry kids in their schools at least once per week
- ✓ 90% of educators say breakfast is critical to academic achievement
- ✓ 57% of teachers and principals have seen a noticeable increase in student attendance after incorporating school breakfast into the instructional day
- ✓ Students who regularly eat school breakfast are less likely to be absent from school and score 17.5% higher on standardized math tests
- ✓ Students who eat breakfast at school are 20% more likely to graduate from high school and will earn \$10,000 more annually
- ✓ Nearly 60% of students qualify for free/reduced-price meals, yet only 30% of students eat breakfast at school because unintended barriers at school prevent them from doing so
- ✓ Only 1 out of 14 economically disadvantaged children who receive meals during the school year continue to receive meals during the summer months
- ✓ Fewer than 20 schools in NC participate in the At-Risk Supper Program

*Source: Ending Childhood Hunger: A social impact analysis. Deloitte Development, LLC, 2013 and NCDPI, Child Nutrition Services, Program Participation Data, 3/21/14

In North Carolina, where 1 in 4 students are food insecure, hunger impacts **HEALTH, EDUCATION** and the **ECONOMY**.

- ✓ Hunger impacts **HEALTH**: Students who struggle with hunger are more likely to experience headaches, stomachaches, colds, ear infections, fatigue and lethargy. Children who seldom get enough nutritious food tend to have significantly more behavioral, emotional and academic problems and tend to be more aggressive and anxious. (Source: National Institutes of Health)
- ✓ Hunger impacts **EDUCATION**: When children and adolescents are denied the nutrients needed for optimal health, they are absent more often from school, are less alert and attentive, are frequently tardy, are disruptive in the classroom, score lower on standardized tests, and achieve lower scores in mathematics, reading and other subjects. (Source Harvard Breakfast Research)
- ✓ Hunger impacts the **ECONOMY**: Increasing participation in Federally-funded school nutrition programs leverages Federal dollars into the state; these Federal dollars are ear-marked for State nutrition assistance programs. When the State fails to leverage these funds, they are returned and distributed to other States that fully participate in these programs. These funds are not simply returned to help balance the Federal budget. (Source: Share Our Strength)

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides Federal funds to States for several school-based nutrition programs that are intended to provide a safety net for students who experience or are at risk for experiencing hunger. Increasing participation in the Federally-funded nutrition programs helps (1) balance State budgets; (2) build stronger communities; (3) create economic security for limited resource families; and (4) ready the workforce by promoting graduation and making sure students are globally competitive for work and postsecondary education and prepared for life in the 21st century.

It is less expensive to make sure students aren't struggling with hunger than to deal with the far more expensive healthcare, education and economic costs of not having access to food.

When North Carolina improves access to school meals, everyone benefits, especially our students.

Innovative School Breakfast Programs

Innovative School Breakfast Programs including breakfast in the classroom, grab-and-go-breakfast and second-chance breakfast can positively impact student health, well-being and academic success. Currently, 96% of NC's public schools offer breakfast in the school cafeteria, but only 30% of students eat breakfast at school, even when breakfast is provided at no cost. Unintended barriers like "breakfast before the bell," late bus or car pool arrivals or the stigma that "only poor children eat school breakfast" prevent many food insecure, hungry children from receiving breakfast. Innovative School Breakfast Programs provided during the instructional day overcome these barriers thus enabling students to start their day well-nourished and ready to learn. (A list of schools participating in innovative School Breakfast Programs is available from the NC Department of Public Instruction, Child Nutrition Services Section.)

What Legislators Can Do: Endorse the State Board of Education's Resolution to promote innovative School Breakfast Programs as part of the instructional day; encourage principals to make innovative school breakfast available to all students as an "education intervention" to promote academic success.

Summer Nutrition Programs

Nearly 58% of students in NC are economically disadvantaged; for these students and their families, school breakfast and lunch are not just conveniences they are necessities. Weekends, holidays, track out sessions or snow days are often times of food deprivation and extreme hunger; this is also true for the summer months when school is not in session. Summer Nutrition Programs, which include the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) administered by the NCDPI and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) administered by the NCDHHS, are Federal entitlement programs that provide funds to schools, nonprofit organizations and government agencies to serve nutritious meals to economically disadvantaged children when school is not in session. NC's participation in Summer Nutrition Programs is dismal; only 1 in 14 students eligible for free/reduced-price meals at school have access to Summer Nutrition Programs. During 2012, the USDA designated North Carolina as a "Strike Force" State due to the State's persistent poverty, rural geography and high numbers of underserved students during the summer months.

What Legislators Can Do: Issue a State-wide Legislative Challenge to all county governments and municipalities to implement Summer Nutrition Programs to ensure economically disadvantaged students have access to nutritious meals during the summer months; create incentives for schools to participate in the Summer Nutrition Programs in coordination with local partnerships.

At-Risk Supper Program

The At-Risk Supper Program helps students get the nutritious meals they need in a safe, supervised location. For many students in NC's public schools, this is the only opportunity to access a healthy meal after the school day ends. Meal sites not only offer students a safe place to go after school, they also provide nutritious, appealing meals that give students the energy they need to concentrate on homework and join their friends in physical, educational, and social activities. Evidence suggests that by providing meals after school, students are absent from school less often and show improvements in behavior throughout the instructional day. The At-Risk Supper Program is available in locations where at least 50 percent of children are eligible for free and reduced-price meals. Schools are a natural location for the At-Risk Supper Program; however, the application and training process may unintentionally prevent many schools from participating in this important program.

What Legislators Can Do: Encourage continued collaboration between the NCDPI and NCDHHS to request waivers from the USDA to simplify the application and training process for schools that would like to participate in the At-Risk Supper Program.