

Policy Brief

Addressing Hunger in School: An Analysis of Educational Food Policies



Background

The negative outcomes stemming from student food insecurity have important implications for the productivity and efficiency of education. This brief examines how North Carolina can expand access to school meals and improve use of two federal school meal programs: the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and the Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) program.

State Policy Projections to Address Student Hunger: CEP vs. FRPL

	Highest Need Schools (ISP ≥ 62.5%)	All Other Schools
Intervention	CEP	Elimination of RPL
Description	Federal funding covers universal free meals for all students.	State covers the \$0.40 fee for reduced price meals.
Potential Costs and Savings	Increased participation rates lead to increased federal funding. Savings through reduction in administrative burden and student meal debt.	State incurred cost of reduced price student fees likely partially offset through reducing student meal debt and associated debt management.

Note: Identified Student Population (ISP) is the percentage of students who are categorically eligible for free meals, such as students whose families receive SNAP or TANF or students who are in foster care or homeless. This is an underestimate of the number of students who actually qualify for free lunch.

Projected Budgetary Requirement to Eliminate Reduced Price Lunch

A reasonable estimate for the state’s budget to eliminate reduced price lunch is \$4 million. This projection is based upon schools that currently participate in FRPL and approximations from CEP schools or schools with low numbers of students qualified for RPL. This estimate includes a 10 percentage point increase in participation among qualified students. If all students who qualified for RPL participated, the estimate is above \$5 million. If the number of qualified students increased, this would change the estimate.

Budget Estimate to Eliminate Reduced Price Lunch

	Estimate	Notes
Projected Estimate	\$3.9 mil	Participation based on free meal uptake
Estimate with Current Participation	\$3.3 mil	No change in participation (Lower bound)
Estimate of All Qualified	\$5.4 mil	Every qualified student every day (Upper bound)

Note: Assumed 180 days of school. Reduced price enrollment projected for schools that are currently in CEP program and do not provide reduced price data.

Classification of Schools as CEP or FRPL Matters for Federal Funding

A needs driven system of meal expansion could meet the needs of more students while targeting the most efficient sources of funding. Efficiency may be improved if schools that do not meet the threshold of 62.5% of students who qualify as identified student populations follow the FRPL program. Some examples of schools that take up CEP but would be better off with FRPL are provided below.

Additional Federal Funds Per Day Through FRPL in Schools Below 62.5% ISP

	Student Need (ISP %)	Federal \$ CEP	Federal \$ FRPL
Anson Co High School	44.52%	\$1,865	\$2,491
Buncombe Co Elementary School	48.62%	\$1,198	\$1,480
Johnston Co Elementary School	45.64%	\$359	\$471
Pitt Co Middle School	47.98%	\$1,713	\$2,156

Note: Dollar amounts indicate maximum reimbursement amounts per day. Examples do not account for potential clustering of schools to reach 100% reimbursement through CEP. This example is intended to apply only to schools that are not clustered or that fall below the 62.5% threshold.

Educational Effects of Hunger

Evidence suggests that hunger relates to barriers in learning such as:

- > Lower Test Scores
- > Discipline Problems
- > Special Education Services
- > Difficulties with Interpersonal Skills
- > Hospitalization

Investing in strategies to reduce hunger has been shown to improve academics and health.

Recommended pilot outcomes include engagement behaviors (absences, discipline, GPA, drop out, graduation), special education referrals, and learning (early learning, EOGs, ACT/SAT). Teacher retention may improve as well.

Innovative Practices to Improve Participation

It is important that districts and schools consider innovative practices to increase participation. Three examples include breakfast kiosks providing breakfast later in the morning, food pantries that allow students to take food home, and summer meals busses to reach students when school is not in session.

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