

AFPC Policy Brief



HB 12: FREE SCHOOL MEALS

House Bill 12 is titled 'An Act relating to free breakfast and lunch in public schools'. The single section of the bill amends Alaska Statute (AS) Title 14 (Education, Libraries, and Museums), Chapter 17 (Financing of Public Schools) by adding a section titled **Free breakfast and lunch in public schools**.

The bill states that the department (the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development - DEED) shall provide - subject to appropriation in addition to other school funding - sufficient funding to a district to provide breakfast and lunch to any student in the district who requests the meal, at no cost to the student. The bill also stipulates that DEED must maximize federal assistance available to the state for providing school breakfast and lunch meals.

AFPC strongly supports free school meals for all students. Below we have listed out some considerations and background information related to this initiative.

Considerations & Background

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP), established under the 1946 Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, was created as a **national security and economic growth program** to protect children's health and well-being while also supporting the domestic agricultural market (42 U.S.C. 1751 Sec 2).

One in six children in Alaska are food insecure, and that too often school is the one place where they can be assured a full meal. <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2022/child/alaska>

Both research and personal experience tell us that **kids perform better, behave better, and are more successful** when their bellies are full.

- <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/SchoolMealsForAll.pdf>
- [What are the benefits of free school meals? Here's what the research says](#) (2023, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign)

Our student nutrition program staff are experts on student meals.

We strongly encourage the Legislature to engage with the Alaska Student Nutrition Association and staff within our schools who are serving thousands of Alaskan students school meals every day.

School nutrition is run as enterprise, or business, programs in our school districts. When there are deficits, the general fund is often leaned on to fill the gaps. It is challenging in the best cases, and nearly impossible in others, to operate a strong school nutrition program in the black. When this proves impossible, schools have dropped out of the USDA school meals programs.

- 2024: [The Lake and Peninsula School District will cut school meal program come January](#) (KDLG)
- 2024: [With hope fading for additional state education funding, Alaska's rural school districts prepare to make difficult cuts](#) (ADN, includes specific references to school meal program cuts)
- 2023: [Alaska schools still struggling to keep up with the cost of food](#) (KFSK/APRN)
- 2022: [Universal free school meal program going away for about half of Alaska's schools](#) (Alaska Beacon/KTOO)
- 2015: [School board to consider cheaper food program options](#) (KSTK, Wrangell School District)

The **Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)** through the USDA allows for all students in a school to receive free breakfast and lunch meals, based on the percentage of students participating in low-income assistance programs such as SNAP. This percentage is vulnerable to change at the federal level, impacting Alaska's participating schools. Learn more: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/cep> and Alaska-based data:

<https://education.alaska.gov/cnp/cep>. According to the FRAC database for the 2023-24 school year, Alaska had 247 eligible and near-eligible schools, with 217 schools adopting CEP. You can see the database here: <https://frac.org/community-eligibility-database/> HB 12 would provide stability for schools across Alaska, allowing for increased efficiencies and planning regardless of changes at the federal level.

Unpaid school meal debt can be a substantial burden on both schools and kids. This is a double-whammy of administrative burden plus shaming on kids whose parents are not providing the funding for their meal accounts.

There are regulations to be followed when it comes to serving game meat and subsistence caught fish provided to schools. Schools must navigate USDA regulations in addition to DEED oversight, AK Department of Fish & Game, and the AK Department of Environmental Conservation. <https://education.alaska.gov/cnp/tfdfg>

The Student Nutrition Association has a national position **supporting the increase of the federal reimbursement rates through the NSLP and SBP**. We know in Alaska, these reimbursements are insufficient - especially in rural communities where the cost of freight can equal or exceed the cost of the food itself. <https://schoolnutrition.org/resource/position-paper-2025/>

Aside from the NSLP and the SBP, federal grants to support school meal programs include the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, those under the USDA Healthy Meals Incentives for Schools (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/schoolmeals/hmi>), and the Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/f2s/grant>), among others. **DEED is only able to apply for federal grants if they have non federal match dollars available.** Our understanding is that they currently do not have those funds available, and we are leaving those opportunities on the table as a result.

Many of our school districts across the state have leveraged federal and private grants to improve their nutrition programs, and help them be more financially solvent. Taking advantage of these opportunities

requires time and experience. We believe state support of school meals to close the gap will provide more capacity for districts to pursue these types of projects.

School nutrition is a complex landscape with strict and extensive compliance measures for schools participating in the USDA school meal programs: National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP).

Participating in these programs provides federal reimbursement for meals served, and also requires extensive documentation and compliance with the national dietary guidelines.

Our kids will benefit from statewide leadership, in addition to individual grant projects, to help improve school meals, incorporate more scratch cooking, and procure more local and traditional foods.

Some of our school districts around Alaska have participated in inspirational efforts with outside grant funding to improve their school nutrition programs. With funding from the Legislature and increased capacity at DEED, there are so many opportunities to share those successes and improve meals for all kids around the state. By closing the gap between federal reimbursement and parents' pocketbooks, the state will free up time and resources to lean into these opportunities. School staff will be able to focus on professional development, incorporation of more scratch cooking and less burden in paperwork, billing, and handling cash/sales.



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