

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 17, 2010
8:04 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Kevin Meyer, Co-Chair
Senator Joe Thomas, Co-Chair
Senator Bettye Davis, Vice Chair
Senator Charlie Huggins
Senator Donald Olson
Senator Gary Stevens

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 213

"An Act providing for funding for school lunch and breakfast."

- HEARD AND HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 213

SHORT TITLE: FUNDING FOR SCHOOL MEALS

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) WIELECHOWSKI

01/19/10	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/8/10
01/19/10	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/19/10	(S)	EDC, FIN
02/17/10	(S)	EDC AT 8:00 AM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

WITNESS REGISTER

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Sponsor of SB 213.

GEORGE ASCOTT, staff to Senator Wielechowski
Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented SB 213.

EDDY JEANS, Director

Division of School Finance

Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)

Juneau, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Answered questions about SB 213.

AMY ROUSE, Director

Division of Nutrition Services

Fairbanks North Star Borough School District

Member, Alaska School Nutrition Association

Fairbanks, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 213.

MICHAEL SOBOCINSKI, Psychologist

Board Member, Food Bank of Alaska

Eagle River, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 213.

BRENT ROCK, Director

Student Nutrition

Anchorage School District

Anchorage, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 213.

SUSANNAH MORGAN, Executive Director

Food Bank of Alaska

Anchorage, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 213.

PENNY VADLA, Board Member

Kenai Peninsula Borough School District

Soldotna, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 213.

DEAN HAMBURG, Director

School Meal Programs

Kenai Peninsula Borough School District (KPBSD)

Soldotna, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 213.

EDDIE EZELLE, Executive Director

Food Pantry of Wasilla

Wasilla, AK

POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 213.

ALEX ANNA SALMON, President
Acting Administrator
Igiugig Village Council
Igiugig, AK
POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 213.

JORDIS CLARK, School Nurse
Anchorage School District
Board Secretary, Food Bank of Alaska
POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 213.

J. PATRICK LUBY, Advocacy Director
AARP, Alaska State Office
Anchorage, AK
POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 213.

HEATHER HARRIS, BHS, Program Manager
Alaska Youth and Parent Foundation (AYPF)
President, Alaska Food Coalition
Anchorage, AK
POSITION STATEMENT: Supported SB 213.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:04:00 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:04 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Stevens, Huggins, Davis, Meyer and Thomas.

SB 213-FUNDING FOR SCHOOL MEALS

[8:04:35 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS announced consideration of SB 213.

CO-CHAIR MEYER moved to adopt the proposed committee substitute (CS) to SB 213, labeled 26-LS1301\E, as the working document of the committee. There being no objection, version E was before the committee.

[8:05:47 AM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI thanked the Alaska Food Coalition, the Alaska School Nutrition Association, and the Food Bank of Alaska for asking him to sponsor this legislation and working closely with him on it. He said this bill will provide a state match for

schools participating in the federal free and reduced-price school breakfast and lunch programs in order to encourage more schools to provide nutritious meals for under-privileged children and allow schools that already do so to improve their programs. Under CSSB 213, he said, the state will provide a match of \$.35 for every free and reduced-price breakfast and \$.15 for every free and reduced-price lunch the federal program funds. He noted that Alaska is one of the few states that does not provide some sort of state contribution.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI continued to say most school districts will receive some additional assistance through a funding formula based on the applicable school district cost factor for each district. Numerous studies have documented the fact that eliminating hunger in children improves school performance, increases school attendance, decreases school violence, and helps to combat obesity. Dealing with these problems now, he said, will help prevent problems that will prove to be much more costly to society in the future.

8:08:03 AM

SENATOR OLSON joined the meeting.

8:08:16 AM

SENATOR HUGGINS asked what the \$.25 [\$.35] and the \$.15 will buy.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI said it will be contributed to the schools to enable schools that currently provide meals to increase the number of meals they provide or increase the number of students they serve, and will enable certain districts that don't currently provide meals to get federal funds for a meals program.

SENATOR HUGGINS asked Senator Wielechowski if this is a federal match.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI turned the question over to his staffer, George Ascott.

GEORGE ASCOTT, staff to Senator Wielechowski, explained that the federal government reimburses school districts that provide free or reduced-price meals, and the state will simply match any reimbursement requests that are submitted to the federal government.

SENATOR HUGGINS asked if he is correct that this will just subsidize the current programs.

MR. ASCOTT said yes, the school districts will decide how to spend the money.

[8:10:00 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER commented that Senator Wielechowski told him some districts are actually using money that was intended to go to the classrooms to pay for school meals. He asked the sponsor to clarify how the state matching funds will be used.

[8:10:41 AM](#)

MR. ASCOTT said he believes all school districts make their own decisions as to how they will supplement the food programs, but all of the districts that have food programs do supplement them in some way.

[8:11:26 AM](#)

SENATOR DAVIS opined that what the sponsor is really trying to do with this bill is to make sure the districts that provide breakfast and lunch don't have to dip into other funds to do it.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI confirmed that is correct.

[8:12:02 AM](#)

SENATOR OLSON asked if the bill has widespread support in the schools among the employees who actually have to operate these programs.

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI said he has not heard any complaints. He did receive a couple of emails from people who were concerned about increasing costs, but the vast majority of people have been very supportive.

[8:13:01 AM](#)

SENATOR OLSON asked if studies exist to support the assertion that school meals improve performance, increase attendance, decrease school violence, and decrease child obesity.

MR. ASCOTT said abstracts of numerous studies have been included in the committee members' hearing packets.

[8:13:34 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked how children qualify for free and reduced-price meals.

[8:14:11 AM](#)

MR. ASCOTT said he believes that each school district has its own application process. He was not sure of the details.

[8:14:45 AM](#)

SENATOR WIELECHOWSKI said children who fall below 130 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) qualify for the free breakfast and lunch programs; children at between 130 and 185 percent of the FPL qualify for reduced-price meals.

[8:15:13 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS commented that if 70 percent [75 percent] of students at a school qualify for free or reduced-price meals, the school can be classified under Title I to receive special funding. He asked if the \$50 million additional funding already being provided to schools this year in the funding formula will cover some of the program costs without burdening the schools.

[8:16:38 AM](#)

EDDY JEANS, Director, Division of School Finance, Department of Education and Early Development, Juneau, Alaska, said every school that offers a program runs at a deficit. Schools are currently paying the deficit by transferring money from their operating fund; districts transferred \$9.1 million for that purpose in 2008. The amount varies from district to district depending upon whether they offer free meals or just reduced-price meals, and whether they offer a combined breakfast and lunch program, just breakfast, or just lunch.

He said this piece of legislation puts the program in the foundation program, and he does not think that is the correct place for it. He offered to work with Senator Wielechowski to identify what section of statute would be more appropriate.

[8:18:48 AM](#)

SENATOR OLSON asked if private schools would be eligible for this type of match.

MR. JEANS answered this bill addresses school districts specifically.

SENATOR OLSON asked if private schools are eligible for federal funds for meals.

MR. JEANS said he believes so.

SENATOR OLSON asked again if this legislation is only for public schools.

MR. JEANS answered yes.

[8:19:37 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked if it is safe to say that the administration supports this bill.

MR. JEANS said he did not have clearance from the governor's office to say the administration supports the bill.

CO-CHAIR MEYER followed up on Senator Huggins' question regarding the additional money coming to schools through the foundation formula. He asked whether some of the costs of meals will be taken care of by the increase in funding, so the proposed state matching funds can free up money to use in the classrooms.

MR. JEANS said school districts believe the money the state is giving them through the foundation program should stay in instruction. Districts are currently transferring \$9.1 million out of what they would call their instructional budget to support the food service budget, and this bill would free up a portion of that money.

[8:20:58 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked for details on the application process.

MR. JEANS said he thinks families have to apply once a year, but will have to get back to the committee on that.

[8:21:20 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked if there is a way for kids who are not from low-income families to buy a breakfast or lunch; he was concerned about the social stigma that might attach to kids who participate in a program for low-income students only.

[8:22:12 AM](#)

MR. JEANS said provisions in the Child Nutrition Law require schools to mask those children who are eligible for the free or reduced-price meals, and many districts that offer breakfast or lunch programs do accommodate students who want to purchase meals.

[8:23:03 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS said he thinks it would be valuable to know about the federal programs as they apply to Title I nutrition services.

MR. JEANS said Title I schools are identified based on the percentage of the student population that is low-income. He said that is what drives eligibility under this program as well.

SENATOR HUGGINS noted that some schools have a working relationship with local charitable organizations to help them provide food for underprivileged students, and encouraged the legislature to look at ways to leverage that type of cooperation. He also questioned how much the additional \$50 million in foundation funding will impact the current \$9.1 million deficit for school meals programs.

MR. JEANS said he understands Senator Huggins' question about the additional funds through the foundation program, but school districts will argue that the money is intended for instruction and not to cover deficits in a federal lunch program.

[8:25:49 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR THOMAS asked how this money will be tracked.

MR. JEANS replied tracking is one reason he would like to work with the bill sponsor to identify the proper place in statute for this program. As additional state funding through the foundation program the funds would be very hard to track; Food service Programs are a special revenue fund and are tracked separately from the general operating fund.

He stressed that the bill as written will not cover the full deficit; districts will still have to transfer some money from the school operating fund.

[8:27:11 AM](#)

SENATOR OLSON referred to a paragraph in the sponsor statement which reads "To compensate for higher costs, rural schools will receive additional assistance through a funding formula based on the applicable School District Cost Factor for each district." He asked if that means a proportionate amount of money will go to rural schools, so they will not be penalized for their lower populations.

MR. JEANS explained the geographic differential is a small adjustment factor intended to help the rural districts offset additional cost such as transportation of goods.

SENATOR OLSON asked if rural schools will still have to subsidize a larger percentage than the larger schools will.

MR. JEANS said he would have to do a little more analysis before he could substantiate that statement.

[8:28:31 AM](#)

AMY ROUSE, Director Division of Nutrition Services, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District and member of the Alaska School Nutrition Association, Fairbanks, Alaska, supported SB 213. She said thirty percent of their students qualify to receive their meals at the free or reduced rate; on average, they serve 1500 breakfasts and 5000 lunches per day. In the month of January, they served over 27,000 breakfasts and 92,000 lunches. Twenty eight percent of the breakfasts and 66 percent of the lunches were served to students who qualified to receive meals at the free or reduced rate.

MS. ROUSE said school meals are nutritionally well-balanced and provide students with a wide variety of fresh produce and whole grain items, which is extremely important to families in a variety of households such as food-poor, military, migrant, those who are struggling to make ends meet, the homeless, and children in transition.

She said many school districts expect the Nutrition Services Department to generate enough revenue to cover expenses, but that has become increasingly difficult; the Fairbanks North Star School District estimates they will have a \$300,000 shortfall this year, and the amount of money available through federal reimbursement and from the price of paid school meals does not cover the food, non-food supplies, transportation, and labor associated with producing them. The state matching funds in SB 213 will help them continue to provide the meals that many children have come to expect.

[8:31:30 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked if Ms. Rouse said one third of the students pay their own way, and two thirds qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

MS. ROUSE responded two thirds of students pay their own way and one third do not.

SENATOR STEVENS asked how much students pay for lunch.

MS. ROUSE said students who don't qualify for free or reduced-price meal benefits pay \$3 for lunch at the elementary school and \$3.25 at the secondary school.

[8:32:37 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS said the military pays Federal Impact Aid Funds to the school districts and asked if there is a food component to that.

MS. ROUSE answered no.

SENATOR HUGGINS asked if she knows the amount of those impact funds.

MS. ROUSE did not know.

[8:33:11 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS mentioned that another unique funding source is federal funding for migrant labor, which applies to some categories of fisherman; he asked if that provides much to the school districts.

MS. ROUSE did not know.

[8:33:42 AM](#)

MICHAEL SOBOCINSKI, Psychologist, and member of the board of directors for the Food Bank of Alaska, Eagle River, Alaska, supported SB 213. He spoke to the committee about children and the complexity of issues they face educationally, socially and emotionally. He said studies have shown the benefit of nutrition to children's success in school, and he has observed this personally over the years.

[8:35:45 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS asked Mr. Sobocinski if his experience supports the link between nutrition and a reduction in violence.

MR. SOBOCINSKI said he is familiar with the research and can say anecdotally that behavior does improve when children are not hungry.

SENATOR HUGGINS referred to child obesity and asserted that, if the state is going to direct money to the task of feeding children, it should have more control over the quality of their diet. He asked for Mr. Sobocinski's recommendations.

MR. SOBOCINSKI answered the quality of the foods that are offered makes a big difference.

[8:37:56 AM](#)

BRENT ROCK, Director, Student Nutrition, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, said he has noticed a concerted effort to improve the student nutrition programs around the state, and the Anchorage School District has followed suit. They worked with the community three years ago to develop a wellness policy and discovered that, because people in low socio-economic areas could not afford the healthier foods, they were buying items high in fats and sugar. The district wanted to reverse that trend by example and by providing healthy foods in the schools. At the same time the district implemented the wellness policy, which meant putting more money into the student nutrition program, the economic downturn forced the costs of food and labor up even higher. They had previously been able to break even on the costs of running their program, but that changed. For the first time in about 15 years, the school board had to transfer about \$1.12 million to help offset the higher costs.

MR. ROCK stated the percentage of students in the Anchorage School District who qualify for free or reduced-price meals has increased over the past two or three years from 25 percent to about 38 percent of 50,000 students, and the amount they receive in reimbursement from the federal government does not come close to covering those meals. Currently, he said, they do not break even on any of their meal programs.

He said a good breakfast makes a big difference in how kids do in school. A study done in 1995 with a large population of students showed definitively that students who eat a good breakfast are more alert, perform better academically, are less likely to have to go to the nurse, and have fewer discipline problems in school. A more recent study upheld these findings.

[8:43:19 AM](#)

MR. ROCK said their average cost to produce a lunch is between \$3.95 and \$4.18 and they get \$3.95 from the federal government; the high volume of meals they provide is the only reason they come close to breaking even. He ended by saying they really want to provide more fresh fruits and vegetables, but if they do that, it will cost even more per pupil than they are now spending.

[8:44:39 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS asked if the district buys any of their produce locally.

MR. ROCK said they try to buy from farmers in the Mat Valley but are bound by state and federal laws to buy at the lowest price, which generally prevents them from giving a preference to local farmers.

SENATOR HUGGINS asked what is on the menu today.

MR. ROCK did not know, but said the menu can be found on the web.

[8:46:17 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked how often people have to go through the application process.

MR. ROCK replied most people apply annually, but those individuals who qualify under direct certification do not have to apply. Qualified individuals include persons on public assistance or food stamps, migrant workers, and homeless persons. He added that the district has seen a tremendous rise in their homeless population, which is up to 3000 students including pre-schoolers.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked if the breakfast program is more selective.

MR. ROCK said they lose more money on breakfast than lunch because of the cost of producing it and the fact that they get a smaller federal reimbursement for it. The maximum federal reimbursement for a breakfast program for a severe-needs student is about \$2.85, and very few of their schools qualify for severe need. He said eleven of their schools qualify for Special Assistance (Provision 2 or 3), so the whole school eats free.

CO-CHAIR MEYER clarified that he wanted to know if all of the students who qualify to eat breakfast at school do so.

MR. ROCK said a low percentage of them actually do eat breakfast.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked if some stigma attaches to kids who get breakfast.

MR. ROCK said he does not think so, because they also have students who buy breakfast. The issue is whether the busses can get kids to school in time to eat, and they are working with the

superintendent of schools and the transportation department to make that possible. He said one school allows kids to eat breakfast in the classroom to ensure they are fed.

CO-CHAIR MEYER asked what happens to these kids in the summer.

8:49:39 AM

MR. ROCK said they have a summer feeding program. They provide meals not only at the summer schools, but at different venues around Anchorage and even take a truck to the Lions Park to feed the kids.

8:50:01 AM

SUSANNAH MORGAN, Executive Director, Food Bank of Alaska, Anchorage, Alaska, said the Food Bank of Alaska and the Alaska Food Coalition recently conducted the 2010 hunger study, which is part of a national study recognized by the Heritage Foundation. They found that 74,000 individual Alaskans ask for food assistance at a food pantry, soup kitchen or shelter every year; of those, 42 percent have children under the age of 18 in the household.

MS. MORGAN said the Food Bank of Alaska and its 300 partners around the state do their best to get food assistance to the families who need it, but they estimate that they need to distribute 13 million pounds of food each year and are only distributing 6 million pounds. They need help, she said, and one of the best ways to make sure kids aren't going hungry while they struggle to find that other 7 million pounds of food, is to see that kids have every opportunity to get meals at school. When the food bank realized 25 percent, or over 100 of Alaska's schools, do not offer a school breakfast program, they saw it as a major opportunity to feed the kids, improve school performance, decrease discipline problems, and decrease obesity all at the same time. She said nearly every state in the union offers some kind of support for school breakfasts, but acknowledged that it is not just a state responsibility. She gave the committee her assurance that the food bank and its partners will be there to advocate for increased reimbursements from the federal level when the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act comes before Congress this year.

She said studies show when kids eat breakfast at school they are less likely to suffer from obesity, even if they have eaten breakfast at home. She explained that the foods provided at school are generally healthier and are eaten earlier in the day so they have a chance to metabolize, which means they are likely

to replace unhealthy foods a child might eat later in the day. She said one of the best things the state can do to fight obesity and hunger is to provide kids with a good breakfast.

MS. MORGAN disclosed that Alaska ranks 49th among states in providing summer meals for children; for every 100 kids who get lunch at school during the school year, only 7 get a meal during the summer. She said the Food Bank of Alaska is working hard on that and sponsored 32 summer food sites last year.

8:54:25 AM

PENNY VADLA, member, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District (KPBSD), Soldotna, Alaska, supported SB 213 and urged the legislature to support funding for school meals. She said 40 percent of the Kenai Borough School District's families qualify for free and reduced meals, and for some students these are the only nutritious meals they eat each day. She felt strongly that money from the foundation formula should be used for instructional purposes as intended, and pointed out that this bill would reimburse the district approximately \$110,000 of the \$300,000 it expects to transfer from its general funds to food services this year.

She closed by saying that it is imperative that SB 213 pass to ensure that no child is left hungry.

8:57:26 AM

DEAN HAMBURG, Director, School meal programs, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, Soldotna, Alaska, supported SB 213. He said while the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides as much as \$34 million per year to feed Alaska's children, it is not enough to prevent schools from having to use classroom funds for meal programs. He emphasized the Kenai will provide over 900,000 school meals to hungry students this year, and the average of \$3.90 per meal in both reimbursement and cash is simply not enough. Hunger is real for Alaska students, he said, two in five students in Alaska qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and their 200 homeless students depend almost solely on those meals.

MR. HAMBURG pointed out the application process is monitored by USDA, and reimbursements through Child Nutrition Services are also monitored carefully, so every dollar goes to school nutrition programs. He said, although it would be wonderful to think the volunteer agencies and other entities could fill the gap, those well-intending groups cannot meet the need of almost 10 million school meals a year.

The Federal government has been doing all the heavy lifting to feed Alaska's children, he chided, and it is really time for the state to take some responsibility for helping to provide school meals.

[9:01:14 AM](#)

EDDIE EZELLE, Executive Director, Food Pantry of Wasilla, Wasilla, Alaska, urged the legislature to support SB 213. He said the Food Pantry served 3570 clients in January and 1800 during the first half of February, at approximately 1.5 meals per client. He challenged the Senators to try skipping lunch today and see if they are able to concentrate on the tasks at hand.

[9:02:55 AM](#)

ALEX ANNA SALMON, President, Acting Administrator, Igiugig Village Council, Igiugig, Alaska, said her village council is one of the 82 active organizations of the Alaska Food Coalition and supports SB 213. She said she is the foster mother of two girls, both of whom suffered food insecurity before coming to live with her, and between raising the girls and working as an assistant at the school, she has seen the direct link between improved nutrition and the quality of education. She said she was in school when they implemented the first lunch program and knows first-hand what a difference it makes. She expressed hope that the additional money will make it possible for them to start a breakfast program as well.

[9:05:44 AM](#)

JORDIS CLARK, School Nurse, Anchorage School District, and Secretary for the Board of Directors of the Food Bank of Alaska, supported SB 213. She said she holds an advanced degree in public health and collected data for the Wellness Policy Committee hunger study that Susannah Morgan mentioned. In answer to Senator Huggins' question about today's menu, she said the elementary schools are offering whole-grain Belgian waffles or cereal, unsweetened applesauce, and a half pint of nonfat milk. She also responded to Senator Meyer's concern about children being identified as recipients of free or reduced meals, saying the data is so carefully guarded that even the employee responsible for preparing and serving those meals does not know.

[9:09:20 AM](#)

J. PATRICK LUBY, Advocacy Director, AARP, Alaska State Office, Anchorage, Alaska, said AARP may seem to be the odd fellow at the table, but their members are grandparents, and they are

concerned about their grandchildren. Over 8000 children are being raised by over 5400 grandparents in Alaska, he said, and 11.5 percent of them live below the federal poverty level. He said these people are living on the edge and need all the help the state can give them; providing breakfast and lunch for their grandchildren at school will help the students succeed and help the grandparents continue to raise these kids. He urged the legislature to support SB 213.

[9:10:38 AM](#)

HEATHER HARRIS, BHS, Program Manager, The Alaska Youth and Parent Foundation (AYPF), and incoming President of The Alaska Food Coalition, supported SB 213. At AYPF, she said, she works with at-risk and homeless youth through their office at the downtown transit center where they provide snacks and drinks, but not a complete meal. After visiting their center and raiding the refrigerator, clients have often said that was the only food they had eaten all day. The 2010 hunger study done by the Alaska Food Coalition and the Food Bank of Alaska revealed that 40 percent of families with children younger than 18 years old skipped meals in the last year, because they did not have enough money for food. She said a lack of adequate nutrition can affect the cognitive behavioral development of children, and food insecurity has been associated with grade repetition, absenteeism, tardiness, anxiety, aggression, poor mathematics skills, psycho-social dysfunction, and difficulty with social interactions.

[9:12:21 AM](#)

MARY FRANCIS, Executive Director, School Administrators' Association, supported SB 213. She said she has not received any input yet from the school superintendants, but will be happy to get that for the committee.

[9:13:47 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR MEYER closed public testimony and held SB 213 in committee.

[9:14:23 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Co-Chair Thomas adjourned the meeting at 9:14 a.m.