

The Basics: Child Nutrition Programs in Alabama

An ACPP Fact Sheet made possible by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

June 10, 2014

Many hungry children miss out on far more than regular meals. Hunger can do serious, long-term harm to a child's health and ability to learn. Childhood hunger is associated with behavioral, attention, academic and emotional problems. Those struggles can include lower math scores and higher levels of obesity, hyperactivity, tardiness, absenteeism, school failure and other potentially lifelong health and learning deficits.

Childhood hunger is a bigger challenge in Alabama than in most other states. Alabama has one of the highest childhood poverty rates in the United States. More than one in four Alabama children live in families with incomes below the poverty level (\$19,790 a year for a family of three). In addition, more than one in five Alabama families with children say they have trouble putting enough food on the table, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Only 10 other states report a higher rate among such families.

Three child nutrition programs have been shown to help improve children's health and ability to learn. All three programs are administered at the federal level by the USDA and at the state level by the Alabama Department of Education. This fact sheet examines the details and effects of those programs: the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program and the Summer Food Service Program.

Who participates in these programs?

Breakfast and lunch are provided in most public schools across Alabama. Summer food programs are sponsored or operated in partnership with local schools, churches and community organizations. School lunch is provided in 1,500 Alabama public schools, and school breakfast is provided in 96.2 percent of these schools.

All children who attend a public school that offers lunch or breakfast are eligible to receive free, reduced-price or full-price meals. Children living in families with incomes below 130 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) – about \$25,700 for a family of three – can get breakfast and lunch at no cost, while children in families earning between 130 percent and 185 percent FPL can receive meals at a very reduced rate. Children in families earning more than 185 percent FPL pay a price set by the school for meals. Children

Are children in your area getting enough to eat in the summertime?

The threat of child hunger doesn't disappear when the school bell rings for summer break. The Summer Food Service Program gives local schools, churches, governments and nonprofits an opportunity to help ensure children get enough to eat year-round. The Alabama Department of Education has a list of open summer food sites by county available online at cnp.alsde.edu/sfsp/sfparticipants.asp.

Is your county among the ones without an open summer food site for 2014? Talk to your community leaders and elected officials about offering a summer food program in your county next summer!

are automatically eligible for free meals if they live in families who receive benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, are homeless, are enrolled in Head Start, are migrants, or are in foster care. All children under 18 who live in U.S. Census block groups or Census tracts where more than half of the children are low-income are eligible for free summer meals at an "open" summer food site.

These meal programs enjoy high participation during the school year. Nearly 540,000 Alabama children ate lunch at school every day in 2013, while more than 224,000 children ate breakfast at school daily. Both programs dwarf the summer food program, which served only 30,308 children per day in 2013. An important advocacy goal is to increase participation in the school breakfast and summer food programs.

How do children and communities benefit?

School meals are vitally important for low-income children, both educationally and nutritionally. Children who eat school meals tend to perform better in the classroom than those who do not. They solve math problems more quickly and with fewer errors, make better math grades, perform better on standardized tests, demonstrate better memory, and have better school attendance with less tardiness and fewer office referrals. On the health front, school meals contribute

to lower childhood obesity rates and to diets richer in a variety of foods, including fruits, vegetables and milk. Summer food programs help many parents stretch their limited food dollars during the summer months when school meals are not available for their children.

New federal nutrition requirements aim to ensure school and summer meals are healthy. Under the rules, such meals soon must include less sodium and fat, more fruits and vegetables, more whole grains and fewer calories. Participating schools also must offer nutrition education and include physical activity during the school day. Many summer food programs include other activities designed to help children exercise, learn and have fun during summer months.

Child nutrition programs also help boost local economies. The USDA reimburses sponsors of school and summer meals between a minimum of 40 cents for full-price meals up to a maximum of several dollars for free meals. Alabama communities received a total of \$264.2 million for school lunch, breakfast and summer meals served in 2013. Sponsors used this money to buy food and supplies from local vendors and to hire lunchroom workers. The Food Research and Action Center urges schools to set breakfast participation goals at 70 percent of the number of children who receive free or reduced-price lunches. If Alabama schools could boost the share of children eating breakfast from the current 51.3 percent to 70 percent, schools would receive an additional \$18.3 million a year.

What are some options for expanding the reach of school meal programs?

Additional flexibility in when school meals are served could increase participation significantly, particularly among low-income and older children. One idea is to offer breakfast in the classroom during the first period, instead of in a lunchroom before school starts. Many teens and older children are more likely to eat a “grab-and-go” school breakfast from a cart or kiosk than they are to go through a meal line in a lunchroom setting. School carts and kiosks also could offer “second-chance” breakfasts during a morning break when many teens are more likely to be hungry.

Community eligibility is a particularly promising recent innovation in school meals. Through this new federal option, schools where 40 percent or more of students are considered low-income can elect to offer free breakfast and lunch to all children in the school. Community eligibility has been shown to increase the

number of children who eat meals at school and to decrease paperwork and administrative costs.

Schools in low-income neighborhoods can offer “seamless summer” food programs that continue existing school breakfast and lunch programs throughout the summer and school breaks. These programs not only make sure that hungry children have regular meals during the summer, but they also provide year-round jobs in our poorest communities. Local governments, schools and nonprofits could work to expand summer food programs to many more sites across Alabama. In summer 2014, the state had more than 700 “open” summer food sites where any child in the neighborhood can receive a meal. But 16 Alabama counties, including some of the state’s poorest, have no open summer food sites anywhere in the county.

Advocates are encouraging Congress to make changes to child nutrition programs to increase access for hungry children. The programs require regular congressional reauthorization and will come up for renewal in 2015. Among the proposed changes are:

- Increasing the number of low-income children who are directly certified for free school meals;
- Eliminating the reduced-price copayment, making these children eligible for free meals;
- Requiring Title I Schools to offer school breakfast and lunch programs;
- Authorizing grants to school districts to buy kitchen equipment and improve meal quality;
- Increasing the “severe need” reimbursement and expanding the number of eligible schools;
- Allowing schools to receive reimbursements retroactively for meals served to children eligible for free and reduced-price meals;
- Streamlining administrative requirements to allow states to provide meals year-round;
- Allowing summer meal programs to provide three meals a day instead of just two; and
- Authorizing grants for transportation to help get children and meals to summer food sites.

Hungry children struggle to learn and may face lifelong health problems because of inadequate nutrition. School and summer meals play a critical role in ensuring every Alabama child can learn and become a healthy and productive adult. Our children and our state deserve no less.

This fact sheet was prepared by policy analyst Carol Gundlach. It may be reproduced with acknowledgment of Arise Citizens’ Policy Project, Box 1188, Montgomery, AL 36101; (800) 832-9060; arisecitizens.org.