



School Breakfast for Texas Students: Better Nutrition Equals Better Health and Better Grades

The importance of a school breakfast program cannot be overstated. Researchers have established that offering breakfast at school improves students' attendance, increases their attentiveness and achievement, and reduces school nurse visits and classroom discipline problems.

The School Breakfast Program has captured the attention of a variety of stakeholders across Texas. Increasing access to and participation in breakfast not only benefits students but also supports the agriculture and dairy industries.

Proposed Policy Reform: CHILDREN AT RISK proposes that the Texas Legislature require schools with student populations of 80% or more living at or below 185% of the federal poverty level to provide free school breakfast to all interested students.

Rationale: The research is clear: school breakfast programs reduce hunger among low-income children, increase academic achievement, lead to improved health and nutrition, and help build lifelong healthy eating habits. Furthermore, while the struggle to obtain a nutritious breakfast particularly affects low-income households, numerous families, regardless of income, find that early morning school bus schedules, long commutes to jobs, and nontraditional work hours make it difficult to find time to prepare and eat a nutritious breakfast at home.

Increasing participation in school breakfast has a positive financial impact on schools that are trying to meet the needs of low-income students by leveraging additional federal funds. Currently, only 30% of students eligible for free or reduced school meals eat breakfast in Texas schools. In addition, children and adolescents who eat breakfast are significantly less likely to be overweight, and skipping breakfast is associated with a higher risk of obesity.

Scope of the Problem: In Texas, roughly 2.9 million public school students live at or below 185% of the federal poverty level and qualify for federally-funded free or reduced-price school meals. Close to half of these students attend schools where at least 80% of their peers also qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Mandating that schools above the 80% threshold provide free breakfast to all interested students would foster greater participation in the School Breakfast Program and improved outcomes among the 1.3 million students enrolled in these high poverty schools.

How much does Universal School Breakfast cost? Providing universal school breakfast in schools where at least 80% of the student population is economically disadvantaged benefits students, schools, and is practically cost neutral. The 80% threshold is useful as it allows school districts to utilize the "severe need" designation and receive a higher federal reimbursement rate per student meal. Schools that serve 40% or more of their meals at a free or reduced price are classified as "severe need". This threshold also allows economies-of-scale to lower the per-meal cost provided to students, due to the higher volume of meal production and consumption.

In the 2012 school year, all "severe need" schools receive the following federal reimbursement: \$0.27 for each paid breakfast, \$1.55 for each free breakfast and \$1.25 for each reduced-price breakfast. The price of breakfast for students varies across the state from 30 cents for reduced price meals to \$1.25 for full price meals.

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