
CHILD WELLBEING & NUTRITION

KEY ISSUES IN CHILD NUTRITION

In recent years, increased attention has been paid by school and district leaders and policymakers to improving student nutrition, and to making school food options healthier. While there is wide agreement about the importance of helping students be well-nourished, the issue still poses several challenges for schools and school systems.

- **Healthier foods cost more**, so eliminating foods with high sugar, salt, and fat contents reduces revenue for school food service groups.
- **School funds dedicated to nutrition leave less to be budgeted elsewhere.** This dilemma makes paying employee salaries and benefits, equipment fees, supplies, and operating costs more difficult for LEAs.
- **Low participation leads to higher prices.** Federal programs provide more funding to schools with higher participation rates, so schools with lower participation rates lose out on two fronts: students are not fully served, and schools pay higher prices for participating students. As a result, it is imperative that North Carolina work to improve its low levels of participation.

INTRODUCTION

When discussing school reform, policymakers and educators have often focused on accountability standards, curriculums, and teaching styles. However, in recent years, the health and wellness of students has appeared more in the discussion. Extensive research and practical knowledge prove that physical health, nutrition, family and community environment, and social and emotional health are essential ingredients that can greatly contribute to, or greatly hinder, a child's ability to learn. This section will focus on issues of child wellbeing and nutrition in North Carolina and address some current policies and programs that seek to support healthy, thriving children. While this section primarily discusses nutrition, overall indicators of child wellbeing as represented by the Forum's *Roadmap of Need* are discussed at the end of the section.

NUTRITION

North Carolina and the United States face a dual dilemma: rising youth obesity and rising youth poverty. Rising poverty rates increase the need for schools to provide adequate meals to their students. At the same time, increasing rates of childhood and adolescent obesity oblige school agencies to limit student access to unhealthy food in exchange for more nutritious options. Improving child nutrition in schools is a vital factor in boosting student performance at all grade levels. Studies have shown that nutritious meals not only supply students with fuel for the school day, but also enhance attentiveness and improve school attendance and classroom behavior. Consuming a nutritious breakfast is especially important because students who eat a filling breakfast exhibit general improvement in their school performance and enhanced cognitive abilities. Furthermore, researchers have found that students who eat breakfast pay attention longer, are tardy less often, have fewer absences, and visit the school nurse less frequently.

Despite the plethora of scientific research studies that speak to the great value of nutritious meals for improving students' academic performance, many students skip breakfast and/or consume high-fat and high-sugar

foods in the morning. Since children can receive up to 50 percent of their daily food intake in school, it is vital that schools make healthy food more accessible to students.

LEGISLATION REGARDING SCHOOL NUTRITION

North Carolina has passed several laws to ensure that students have access to nutritious foods at public schools and institutions. Recent legislation includes:

- North Carolina's Nutrition Standards for Elementary Schools
 - Oversees the distribution of food offered through the National School Lunch Program, the After School Snack Program, and a la carte items
 - Sets health requirements for school food offerings to control for fat and sugar calories, whole grain content, fruit and vegetable offerings, as well as milk varieties available
 - Prohibits the sale of a la carte items that do not meet minimum nutritional values and processed foods that are predominantly made from sweeteners, including soda, chewing gum, and candy
- Senate Bill 415 (2011)
 - Requires that school breakfasts must be provided "at no cost to children who qualify for reduced-price meals"
- General Statute 115C-264
 - Mandates that "all school food services shall be operated on a nonprofit basis, and any earnings therefrom over and above the cost of operation... shall be used to reduce the cost of food, to serve better food, or to provide free or reduced-price lunches to indigent children"
- General Statute 143-64
 - Allows local administrative units, community colleges, and other public institutions to set nutritional standards on the types of beverages sold at each respective institution

OBESITY

- ✓ According to the 2013 Youth Risk and Behavior Survey, 15.2% of North Carolina high school students are overweight, and an additional 12.5% are obese.¹
- ✓ Since 1995, the rate of childhood obesity in North Carolina has been increasing steadily.

NATIONAL SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS

Recognizing the public school as a place where children both eat and learn, the federal government has created several laws, guidelines, and subsidy programs that help schools provide nutritious food and health education to students. Below is a brief overview of current federal school nutrition programs.

GENERAL QUALIFICATIONS FOR ALL NATIONAL SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS

All public and non-profit private schools as well as residential childcare institutions that serve children are eligible to participate in federal school nutrition programs. National school nutrition programs offer United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) subsidies to schools serving meals that meet the federal Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Children at participating schools and institutions are able to receive meals at full price, reduced-price, or for free depending on family income.

¹ CDC, Division of Adolescent and School Health, 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Table 106. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/ss/ss6304.pdf>.

INCOME ELIGIBILITY STANDARDS FOR FREE AND REDUCED-PRICE MEALS (2015-2016)

Household Size	Annual Income	
	Free	Reduced
1	\$15,301	\$21,775
2	\$20,709	\$29,471
3	\$26,117	\$37,167
4	\$31,525	\$44,863
5	\$36,933	\$52,559
6	\$42,341	\$60,255
7	\$47,748	\$67,951
8	\$53,157	\$75,647
Each additional family member add:	\$5,408	\$7,696

NC DPI, Income Eligibility Standards for Free and Reduced-Price Meals. Available at <http://childnutrition.ncpublicschools.gov/information-resources/eligibility/eligibility/income-eligibility-guidelines/201516ieprev.pdf>.

The monetary subsidies that the USDA offers to participating schools and institutions increase as the price each student pays for a meal decreases. All school food authorities, which provide food to students in these qualifying schools and institutions, are allowed to set the prices for meals, but must operate as non-profit organizations.

At the federal level, school nutrition programs are administered by the Food and Nutrition Services at the USDA. At the state level, school nutrition programs are operated by State Education Agencies, which have agreements with school food authorities.

NORTH CAROLINA'S PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS

North Carolina school nutrition programs are administered and monitored by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, specifically in the Child Nutrition Services (CNS) branch. All federal lunch and breakfast programs are available to students enrolled in public school. In 2013-14, 423,909 students participated in school breakfast programs, and 876,862 participated in national school lunch programs.² In the 2014-2015 school year, approximately 679,858 students qualified for free meals and 73,959 students qualified for reduced price meals.³

North Carolina public and private non-profit schools offer both reimbursable meals and a la carte items through USDA meal programs. However, a la carte items do not necessarily comply with federal Dietary Guidelines for Americans and therefore do not warrant USDA subsidies.

² Food Research and Action Center, North Carolina. Available at <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/nc.pdf>.

³ NC DPI, 2014-15 Free & Reduced Meals Application Data. Available at <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/fbs/resources/data/>.

A LA CARTE DILEMMA

Although the USDA programs offer subsidies to schools that serve meals which satisfy federal dietary guidelines, many school food authorities also provide a la carte items which include beverages and foods that do not comply with federal dietary standards. Since the early 1990s, the sale of a la carte items has increased as students have developed a taste preference for high-fat and high-sugar foods. In response, school food authorities sell these products at increasingly higher rates to gain profits. Because of the student taste trend and greater profit from the a la carte items, there has been a recent shift from the USDA-subsidized meal to the a la carte meal. Due to this shift, state and local funds for food have been appropriated elsewhere. This reality creates a dilemma as school food authorities must find a way to best feed students while simultaneously earning sufficient profits to operate.

NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM (NSLP)

The National School Lunch Program helps provide nutritionally balanced meals to students in elementary, middle and high schools. Under the NSLP, school food authorities must serve meals that meet the federal Dietary Guidelines for Americans and must offer these meals at a reduced price or at no additional charge to students who qualify. In return, the USDA grants the school or institution a monetary subsidy for every meal served. In 2014, the NSLP operated in over 99,000 public and nonprofit private schools (grades K-12) and residential child care institutions across the country. The NSLP provided low-cost or free lunches to over 30.3 million children daily.⁴

Reimbursement rates for the NSLP are set based on the percent of free and reduced price lunches served by a school during the second preceding school year, meaning the actual meals provided by a school food authority in 2012-13 determine the reimbursement rates for 2014-15. Based on this model, in 2014-15, the reimbursement rates for a school food authority that served 60% free and reduced price lunches during the second preceding school year were:⁵

Free Lunch	Reduced-Price Lunch	Paid Lunch
\$2.93	\$2.53	\$0.28

THE AFTER SCHOOL SNACK PROGRAM (ASSP)

Funding for the National School Lunch Program also serves food to children who participate in afterschool academic or care programs. Under the After School Snack Program, eligible schools and institutions, where least 50 percent of the enrolled children are eligible for free or reduced meals, receive USDA cash subsidies for each snack they serve in afterschool programs that are education or enrichment based. To receive the subsidy, the nutritional content of the snacks must meet federal guidelines. Currently, 27,000 schools nationwide participate in this program.

SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM

Under the School Breakfast Program, schools and institutions that provide their students with breakfast meals that meet the federal Dietary Guidelines for Americans receive monetary subsidies from the USDA.

⁴USDA National School Lunch Program. Available at <http://ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/child-nutrition-programs/national-school-lunch-program.aspx#.Uu-9GdLjiTM>.

⁵ USDA, National School Lunch Program Fact Sheet. Available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/NSLPFactSheet.pdf>.

The reimbursement rates for the 2014-15 school year were:⁶

Free Breakfast	Reduced-Price Breakfasts	Paid Breakfasts
\$1.58	\$1.28	\$0.28

All children can participate in the program and meals are offered at full price, reduced price, or no charge, depending on the student's family income. In 2013-2014, 88,657 schools and institutions participated in the School Breakfast Program, serving over 13 million children nationwide. While this program has expanded greatly, large numbers of eligible students still do not take advantage of the School Breakfast Program.

SPECIAL MILK PROGRAM

In the Special Milk program, the USDA provides monetary subsidies to all eligible schools and institutions that serve milk to children. The milk must meet state and local standards concerning fat content and flavoring options as well as comply with the fat and vitamin requirements set by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Schools and institutions must offer milk at full price, reduced-price, or no charge, depending on students' household family income. Schools and institutions that do not participate in the National School Lunch Program or School Breakfast Program are still eligible to participate in the Special Milk Program. Schools or childcare facilities in the National School Lunch Program or School Breakfast Program already receive subsidies for the milk they offer students with breakfast and lunch meals; therefore, they are not eligible to receive additional USDA subsidies for milk. However, schools who participate in the National School Lunch Program and/or School Breakfast Program may participate in the Special Milk Program to provide milk to students in pre-K or Kindergarten. In 2012, over 61 million half-pints of milk were served through the Special Milk Program.⁷ However, participation in the Special Milk Program is decreasing as more schools join the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program.

SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM (SFSP)

The Summer Food Service Program provides meals and snacks to children in low-income areas throughout the summer when children cannot receive meals in school. The USDA offers subsidies for all meals and snacks served by eligible schools and institutions, given that the food offered meets federal health requirements. This program runs on a volunteer basis: schools and institutions such as public schools, non-profit private schools, public or private non-profit camps, municipal, county, tribal, and state governments can freely participate in the program. In most programs, children receive one or two reimbursable meals per day. Students in the program follow the same payment methods as they do during the year for free, reduced-price, or paid meals.

States may determine eligibility requirements. In North Carolina, students are eligible for the Summer Food Service Program under the following requirements:

- Under 18 years of age or disabled individuals over 18 years of age
- Enrolled in "required" academic summer schools where students must attend classes in order to advance to upper grade levels and/or graduate⁸

⁶ USDA, School Breakfast Program Fact Sheet. Available at <http://childnutrition.ncpublicschools.gov/programs/sbp/sbp-factsheet.pdf>.

⁷ USDA, Special Milk Program. Available at http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/SMP_Quick_Facts_0.pdf.

⁸ USDA, Summer Food Service Program. Available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/summer-food-service-program-sfsp>.

SEAMLESS SUMMER OPTION PROGRAM

The Seamless Summer Option Program offers meals to students in low-income areas through the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. Schools and institutions that are part of the National School Lunch Program and/or School Breakfast Program may apply for the Seamless Summer Option Program, which allows them to continue to use the same food service and regulations from school year throughout summer months and track out periods. To participate in the Seamless Summer Option Program, schools must be area-eligible, meaning that 50 percent or more of the students in that area must qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Under this program, school food authorities are able to serve free meals to all children and youth under 18 years of age in low-income areas.

There are several types of schools and institutions that may run the program including:

- **Open sites:** all children eat free in communities where at least 50% of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.
- **Restricted open sites:** sites that meet the open site criteria, explained above, but are later restricted for safety, control, or security reasons.
- **Closed enrolled sites:** may be in any community for an enrolled group of low-income children and meets the 50 percent criteria explained above. This excludes academic summer schools.
- **Migrant sites:** serving children of migrant families.
- **Camps:** residential or non-residential camps.⁹

STRIKEFORCE INITIATIVE FOR RURAL GROWTH

In 2013 North Carolina became a StrikeForce state as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s StrikeForce Initiative for Rural Growth and Opportunity. This initiative was created to address the specific challenges associated with rural poverty. Nationally, StrikeForce has invested more than \$23.5 billion to create jobs, build homes, feed kids, assist farmers and conserve natural resources across more than twenty states.¹⁰ Specifically in North Carolina, the initiative has provided 5,047,144 summer meals for kids. Participating Counties in North Carolina include:

Alleghany County	Edgecombe County	Montgomery County	Sampson County
Anson County	Gates County	Nash County	Scotland County
Beaufort County	Graham County	Northampton County	Swain County
Bertie County	Granville County	Pamlico County	Tyrrell County
Bladen County	Greene County	Pasquotank County	Vance County
Caswell County	Halifax County	Perquimans County	Warren County
Cherokee County	Hertford County	Person County	Washington County
Chowan County	Hoke County	Pitt County	Watauga County
Clay County	Hyde County	Richmond County	Wayne County
Cleveland County	Jackson County	Robeson County	Wilkes County
Columbus County	Lenoir County	Rowan County	Wilson County
Duplin County	Martin County	Rutherford County	

Source: USDA, StrikeForce Initiative for Rural Growth and Opportunity North Carolina.

⁹ USDA, Opportunity Schools. Available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/opportunity-schools>.

¹⁰ USDA, StrikeForce Initiative for Rural Growth and Opportunity North Carolina. Available at <http://www.usda.gov/documents/nc-strikeforce-info-0115.pdf>.

FRESH FRUIT AND VEGETABLE PROGRAM (FFVP)

The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program provides fresh produce to select schools across the nation. The USDA finances this program and aims to combat childhood obesity by educating students about healthy food choices and offering healthy food to students. Eligibility of schools and institutions is need-based. Therefore, schools with a high proportion of students who receive reduced-price or free meals are selected for the program more frequently.

The program began as a pilot in 2002, and after experiencing success in exposing students to healthy food options, was expanded to all states and US territories in 2008. North Carolina has selected certain schools to participate in this program. In 2014-2015 year, 155 schools participated in the FFVP, and 71,176 children were served.¹¹ These funds provide fresh produce to students in the selected schools and allocate funds to help teachers incorporate nutrition education into lesson plans.

HEALTHY, HUNGER-FREE KIDS ACT OF 2010

In December 2010, President Obama signed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. Included in this legislation were the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), the Summer Food Service Program, the Afterschool Meal Program and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed). This legislation provides \$4.5 billion in new resources for those programs. The law increased, for the first time in 15 years, the School Lunch and School Breakfast per meal reimbursement by six cents. Schools must meet the new nutrition standards in order to receive the meal reimbursement increase.

NORTH CAROLINA INITIATIVES TO PROMOTE NUTRITIOUS FOOD FOR CHILDREN

In response to North Carolina's dual dilemma of high childhood obesity and food insecurity, the state has taken action to increase participation in meal programs and make the food offered in schools more nutritious. There are several initiatives housed in the North Carolina Division of Public Health (NC DPH) with the NC Department of Health & Human Services that further promote healthy eating and lifestyles for children and their families. The NC DPH offers assistance and resources for classroom lesson plans, course studies, nutritional information handouts, and access to further resources that parents, school administrators, school food authorities, and teachers can use to promote health and provide food to all of North Carolina's students.

SCHOOL BREAKFAST INITIATIVES

In regard to breakfast, North Carolina has tried various ways to make the food offered through the Innovative School Breakfast Program more accessible to students by using innovative distribution methods. Under this program, depending on home income levels, students may purchase breakfast at a full price, a reduced-price, or receive breakfast for free.

¹¹ NC DPI, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) Applications Received for SY 2014-2015. Available at <http://childnutrition.ncpublicschools.gov/programs/ffvp/2schspercent.pdf>.

The methods of breakfast service that are either in use or that North Carolina Division of Public Health promotes include:¹²

Breakfast in the Classroom	Breakfast is delivered to the classroom by Child Nutrition staff, school staff or students. Breakfast is incorporated into academic instruction time.
Grab n' Go	Handheld breakfast items are served. Items can be bagged or packaged for quick pick up. Students can eat breakfast in the cafeteria, classroom or another location on school campus.
Satellite Breakfast or Breakfast Kiosk	Breakfast is served in high traffic area away from cafeteria (i.e., school bus or carpool drop off, parking lot, entrance, or hallway).
Breakfast Break	Breakfast is served after first period or at a scheduled time later in the morning.
Second Chance Breakfast	Breaking is served after first period or at a scheduled time later in the morning for students who miss breakfast before school.
Breakfast on the Bus	Breakfast is served and eaten on the bus on the way to school.
Universal Breakfast	School districts with a higher percentage of students who are eligible for free and reduced price meals are able to balance expenses and reimbursements to offer breakfast at no charge to all students regardless of income.

In July of 2011, North Carolina ratified a bill allowing all students who qualify for reduced-price meals to receive breakfast for free. In doing so, North Carolina hoped to increase participation in the School Breakfast Program and to decrease food insecurity levels. The term food insecurity refers to the USDA's measure of lack of access, at times, to enough food for all household members and limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods. Food insecure households are not necessarily food insecure all the time. Food insecurity may reflect a household's need to make trade-offs between necessities, such as housing or medical bills and purchasing nutritionally adequate foods.

NO KID HUNGRY INITIATIVE

In addition to innovative distribution methods, North Carolina piloted a program entitled "No Kid Hungry" in September 2011. Administrators introduced the program in 28 schools to increase participation in School Breakfast Programs. Under "No Kid Hungry," free breakfast was widely offered and the number of children who could receive free meals during the summer was increased. Since only 13% of eligible students utilized free or reduced-price meal programs during the summer months, the "No Kid Hungry" campaign focused on expanding the number of students eligible for these meals.

"No Kid Hungry" campaigns have been launched in several other states. These campaigns have positively impacted childhood food insecurity by increasing student participation in school breakfast programs and decreasing overall food insecurity levels.

ACTION AGAINST OBESITY

In response to the rising obesity rate and popularity of unhealthy a la carte items, North Carolina schools have also taken action to make healthier foods available to students. Many school systems have increased their fruit, vegetable, and whole grain offerings, limited fried food options, and reduced the types of available

¹² NC DPI, Innovative School Breakfast Programs. Available at Childnutrition.ncpublicschools.gov/programs/sbp/innovative-school-breakfast-programs

foods with high fat and sugar content levels. Schools are also eliminating whole milk and emphasizing the USDA-subsidized meal.

In 2006, North Carolina created Nutrition Standards for Elementary Schools in efforts to make school meals and afterschool snacks healthier. These guidelines require all reimbursable meals to meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, restrict sugar and fat contents of a la carte foods, and improve fruit, vegetable, and whole grain offerings. All North Carolina elementary schools were required to implement these food standards by the end of the 2008 school year. Nearly all schools had achieved these new guidelines and maintained them until many schools lost integral funding.

ROADMAP OF NEED

The Public School Forum's North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs (NC CAP) created an in-depth needs assessment for our state's youth.¹³ NC CAP's Roadmap of Need contains twenty indicators of wellness in counties across North Carolina, divided into four categories:

1. Health
2. Youth Behavior and Safety
3. Education
4. Economic Development

HEALTH

The indicators used to determine county and statewide health wellness included teen pregnancy rates, number of physicians, child fatality, child food insecurity, and child obesity. Below are the statewide statistics on each indicator:

- Teen Pregnancy Rate per 1,000 = 44.90
- Number of Physicians per 10,000 = 22.73
- Child Fatality Rate per 10,000 = 5.64
- Child Food Insecurity Rate = 26.10%
- Child Obesity Rate = 14.50%

YOUTH BEHAVIOR AND SAFETY

To assess overall youth behavior and safety, NC CAP chose to evaluate the juvenile delinquency rate, short term suspensions, juvenile detention admissions, children in Division of Social Services (DSS) custody, and child abuse and neglect. Below are the statewide statistics on each indicator:

- Juvenile Delinquency Rate per 1,000 = 22.52
- Short-Term Suspension Rate per 1,000 = 132.89
- Juvenile Detention Admissions Rate per 1,000 = 2.08
- Children in DSS Custody Rate per 1,000 = 6.32
- Child Abuse and Neglect Rate per 1,000 = 10.39

¹³ Public School Forum of NC, 2016 Roadmap of Need. Available at <https://www.ncforum.org/roadmap-of-need/>.

EDUCATION

The indicators for education include cohort graduation rates, 3rd grade reading proficiency, Math I proficiency, ACT composite scores, and percentage of Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs) met. Below are the statewide statistics on each indicator:

- Graduation Rate = 83.9%
- 3rd Grade Reading Proficiency = 60.20%
- Math I Proficiency = 60.00%
- ACT Composite Score = 18.50
- Percentage of AMO Targets Met = 55.20%

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The final category in the Roadmap is economic development. The indicators used to assess county and statewide economic development included median household income, child poverty, unemployment rate, adults with bachelor's degree, and single parent households. Below are the statewide statistics on each indicator:

- Median Household Income = \$46,556
- Percentage of Children Living in Poverty = 24.10%
- Unemployment Rate = 6.10%
- Percentage of Adults with at least a Bachelor's Degree = 27.80%
- Percentage of Children Living in Single-Parent Households = 36.15%