

Testimony
Budget Section – Education and Environment Division
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My name is Lynelle Johnson, and I serve as the Director of Child Nutrition and Food Distribution Programs with the Department of Public Instruction. The National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs are federally administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and implemented at the state level by the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction. These programs aim to ensure that students receive nutritious meals that support their health and academic success. As the state administering agency, DPI is responsible for oversight, including administrative reviews, training, and technical assistance to ensure schools meet the federal requirements.

North Dakota National School Lunch Program Participation

District	Free	Reduced	State EIG	Paid	Total Enrolled
Public (168)	31,359	7,489	1,738	78,920	119,506
Private (25)	477	208	45	6,025	6,755
Total (193)	31,836	7,697	1,783	84,945	126,261

- Average breakfast participation: 31%
- Average lunch participation: 66%
- 26,000 Students qualify automatically for free or reduced status via Direct Certification. (no application required)

Meal Reimbursement Structure

- All school meals are federally funded
- Schools must maintain a non-profit food service account
- Schools receive USDA Foods Entitlement (Commodities) for each reimbursable meal they serve (.45 per meal)

Current Structure			Future Structure		
	Federal Portion	State Portion		Federal Portion	State Portion
Free Breakfast	\$ 2.46	\$ -	Free Breakfast	\$ 2.46	\$ -
Free Lunch	\$ 4.69	\$ -	Free Lunch	\$ 4.69	\$ -
Reduced Breakfast	\$ 2.16	\$ 0.30	Reduced Breakfast	\$ 2.16	\$ 0.30
Reduced Lunch	\$ 4.29	\$ 0.40	Reduced Lunch	\$ 4.29	\$ 0.40
State 225 Breakfast	\$ 0.40	\$ 2.06	Full Price Breakfast	\$ 0.40	\$ 2.06
State 225 Lunch	\$ 0.53	\$ 4.16	Full Price Lunch	\$ 0.53	\$ 4.16
Full Price Breakfast	\$ 0.40				
Full Price Lunch	\$ 0.53				

Meal Reimbursement Payments:

- School Year 2024-25
\$38,124,183 Federal Reimbursements
\$1,610,908 State Reimbursements
- School Year 2023-24
\$35,133,169 Federal Reimbursements
\$1,589,376 State Reimbursements

History of Legislative Support for School Meals in North Dakota:

2015 Biennium

- State funding provided the .30 fee for Reduced-Price Breakfasts

2023 Biennium

- Senate Bill 2284 Section 17
 - Allocated \$6 million for no-cost meals for households up to 200% of the federal poverty level, including covering the .40 lunch fee for reduced-priced students
 - A family of four earning less than \$62,400 annually qualified for no-cost meals
 - **1,688** students qualified in the 2023-24 school year, **1,783** students in 2024-25
 - Used \$3.2 million of \$6 million allocated
- House Bill 1494 Anti-Lunch Shaming Act
 - Protects students with unpaid meal balances
 - Prohibits schools from denying meals, stigmatizing students, or barring participation in school activities due to unpaid meal debts

2025 Biennium – House Bill 1013

- House Bill 1013 Section 12
 - Allocated \$6 million for no-cost school meals for households up to 225% poverty level
 - A family of four earning less than \$73,338 annually qualifies for meals at no cost
 - **Currently, 2972** students have qualified for “State 225”
- House Bill 1013 Section 22

- Requires Electronic Free/Reduced Meal Applications by School Year 2026-27

Several variables influence the overall State cost-share of providing no-cost meals

- Changes in Medicaid/SNAP participation, which impact Direct Certification eligibility
- Free/Reduced Application Rate – fewer families may submit applications, which could reduce federal reimbursements and increase state reimbursements
- Participation Rates, which were significantly higher during COVID, when all students received free meals

Cost Scenarios

- Using 24-25 actual participation and reimbursement rates, the cost of providing no-cost meals statewide would have been approximately \$44 million.

Meal	Did Pay	Would Have Paid
Lunch	\$ 1,274,720.12	\$ 38,983,448.85
Breakfast	\$ 336,188.35	\$ 5,058,242.83
Total	\$ 1,610,908.47	\$ 44,041,691.68

- The original projection of \$140 million was estimated prior to implementing the Direct Certification for Medicaid students and assumed a higher percentage of increase in meals.
- Future Cost Scenario:

BREAKFAST	27-28	28-29
14% Increased Participation	\$ 6,360,571.49	\$ 6,589,914.62
10% Direct Certification Decrease	\$ 636,057.15	\$ 658,991.46
10% Free/Reduced Application Rate Decrease	\$ 636,057.15	\$ 658,991.46
TOTAL	\$ 7,632,685.79	\$ 7,907,897.54
BIENNIUM BREAKFAST SUBTOTAL		\$ 15,540,583.33
LUNCH	27-28	28-29
12% Increased Participation	\$ 48,386,590.57	\$ 50,131,265.87
10% Direct Certification Decrease	\$ 4,838,659.06	\$ 5,013,126.59
10% Free/Reduced Application Rate Decrease	\$ 4,838,659.06	\$ 5,013,126.59
TOTAL	\$ 58,063,908.69	\$ 60,157,519.05
BIENNIUM LUNCH SUBTOTAL		\$ 118,221,427.74
BIENNIUM TOTAL		\$ 133,762,011.07