

# Policy Options for Improvement of School Breakfast/Lunch Participation

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## Context

For many years, Nevada has been last in the nation in school breakfast and lunch participation, 53<sup>rd</sup> in fact - after Guam, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia - leaving thousands of children who are eligible to receive free/reduced price school meals unfed, along with middle-class children who have not eaten breakfast for other reasons than lack of food in the home.

According to 2012 USDA data, Nevada has 156,523 children living in poverty, and 186,380 children who are considered food insecure (at that time- data lags behind). The disparity in these numbers (and significantly larger food insecurity figure) is related to the fact that the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is based on a calculation that has not changed since the 1960's. The USDA's Economic Policy Institute annually calculates the basic family budget (a more realistic number representing what it takes to live) in all states. In Nevada that figure is approximately three times the FPL (see attachments).

Historically, each USDA child nutrition program has been instituted to improve the health and well-being of children with few resources and to improve societal outcomes, including reduction of medical costs, improvement of education outcomes, improvement of birth outcomes, and as you will see, improve national security.

The USDA child nutrition programs began with the creation of the school lunch program, shortly after World War II for the following reason: Thousands of young men who grew up in the Depression were unable to serve their country for reasons associated with malnutrition. The President aimed to rectify this appalling fact in 1946 by providing at least one nutritious meal per day to all children, where they could most reliably be found during the day - at school. The school breakfast program pilot began in 1966 in schools serving low-income communities. It was found highly effective in terms of improving health and school performance, and rolled out across the nation in 1975. The suite of child nutrition programs for children outside the home was completed with the creation of the Summer Food Service Program for Children (providing meals when school is not in session) and the Child and Adult Care Food Program, which originally addressed improving nutrition in day care settings, more recently expanding to include children up to age 18 in afterschool care and supplemental education settings.

The most comprehensive child nutrition program, so to say, is SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which improves food security for children at home. According to the USDA, 49% of all SNAP benefits are utilized by children and 75% go to households with children. WIC (Women's, Infant's and Children's Supplemental Feeding Program) was formally created in 1972, as a tool for reducing the number of premature and low-birthweight babies, and health problems such as anemia, spina bifida and other nutrition-related diseases/concerns. Target audience: pregnant and lactating women and children from birth to age 5, who are at nutritional risk. Families can participate in both WIC and SNAP simultaneously if income eligible for both. SNAP benefits typically run out between 2.5 and 3 weeks into the month, making use of both programs an important option for improving nutrition for at-risk children. Currently, Nevada has no mechanism to cross reference and ensure that this option is being employed by eligible families, but it is being investigated.

Nationally, only half of children who eat lunch at school also consume breakfast at school, for a variety of reasons. Until very recently, breakfast was typically served before school, and bus schedules were a commonly cited prohibitive factor, with children arriving too late to partake. The advent of breakfast in the classroom, grab and go breakfast, second chance breakfast (after 1<sup>st</sup> period) and other recently introduced options have altered the landscape, making wider participation in school breakfast a more achievable goal. A remaining challenge is actual meal cost vs USDA meal reimbursement, particularly in smaller and more rural school districts where food and transportation costs may be higher and economy of scale is difficult to reach. The fact remains that, for many children, having breakfast at school is a key opportunity to improve health, behavior, attendance and academic achievement.

## **The Opportunity Afforded by Policy Change**

Improving participation in school lunch and breakfast programs is simple though not always easy, and a handful of strategies have been very successful in communities, school districts and states throughout the nation. These are well documented and available for discussion. Most have been accomplished by policy change or legislation – and many strategies can be addressed in either format. Clearly, adoption of strategies by state or district policy change is the simplest means of improving participation. The first step is to clarify or identify the problem that needs to be addressed, and then to determine whether policy change or other solutions will accomplish the goal or whether legislation is required.

## **Policy changes, whether at state or district level, can have significant impact in school breakfast and lunch participation. Examples of local policy change:**

Washoe County School District Nutrition Services adopted a policy four years ago to implement Provision 2 at all schools which were above 65-70% F/R (currently 60%), and the school board subsequently directed that all Provision 2 schools would provide Breakfast in the Classroom, significantly improving participation in school breakfast. Between 2011 and 2013, Nevada improved to 31<sup>st</sup> in the nation in school breakfast participation, due in part to improvement in breakfast participation in Clark County schools as a result of district policy change implementing Universal Breakfast at selected schools.

## **Policy Possibilities to Consider**

### **General Increase in Meal Participation**

- Utilizing Provision 2 or CEP in high needy schools for universal free breakfast and lunch - Most economically feasible/practical for schools at or above ~75% F/R level (district/state)

### **Community Eligibility Program – Universal Free Meals**

Pilots show 28% increase for breakfast and 7% for lunch, and increased revenue

- Educate districts/schools to advantage of CEP, especially elimination of application and geographic advantage of “bundling” schools to bring marginally eligible schools up to the level where it is financially feasible, and additionally, makes more schools eligible for summer lunch services.
- Increase breadth of direct certification to improve eligibility numbers at the school level
- Create formula to equate CEP with F/R to reduce fear related to loss of Title I funding
- Increases revenue and breakfast participation
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### **Provision 2 – Universal Free Meals**

- Where direct certification numbers are not high enough to support CEP, Provision 2 (applications every 4 years rather than annually) is an acceptable substitute.
- Increases revenue and breakfast participation

### **Solve challenges re completion of application for F/R school meals by:**

- Educating teachers/PIF – Parent Involvement Facilitators - regarding automatic eligibility for school meals for families receiving SNAP benefits and provide outreach for that program (NDA and school district policy, non-profits)
- Increasing SNAP participation to increase direct certification of children for meals (DWSS/DHHS policy)
- Maximizing frequency of direct cert communication between DWSS and Districts/schools (DWSS/NDA policy)
- Elimination of Reduced Price designation (school district or state policy)

## **Breakfast after the Bell Options**

- Instructional time may include Breakfast in the Classroom – (policy change recommended DOE)  
A policy change is not required, but eliminates issue as an excuse for not implementing classroom breakfast.
- Breakfast in the Classroom
- Grab and Go Breakfast
- Second Chance Breakfast
- Instructional time – policy change

## **Improving Economy of Scale and Financial Stability/viability policy options**

- Joint purchasing
- Modernization of school food programs using restaurant industry cost containment method
- Additional per meal reimbursement for school breakfast in rural/low scale communities
- Funding for startup/expansion costs for implementation of alternative breakfast models

**Child Nutrition Reauthorization** – Advocating for changes to improve access, streamline regulations and roll out effective programs such as Summer EBT, which adds funds to either WIC or SNAP cards to improve family food resources for children in the summer, particularly in areas where the Summer Meal program is difficult to implement.

**This council could adopt its own policy:** to request official advocacy by state officials for important legislation affecting USDA nutrition programs, providing recommendations for that purpose. Currently, advocacy is most often conducted by non-profit organizations.

**Attached are policy papers** from SOS (Share our Strength), FRAC (Food Research and Action Center) and Feeding America, the latter primarily addressing federal policy and legislation. There are extensive opportunities for policy and regulatory changes at the federal level which could make it easier for states to conduct and administer child nutrition programs – a topic for another time in the very near future.