

Boosting Student Success

Removing Barriers to School Meals

Providing no-cost school meals will fight child hunger in North Carolina and boost our kids' academic performance.

School meals fight child hunger

In North Carolina, 1 in 6 children struggle with hunger, which means they aren't able to get enough food or they aren't able to get enough *healthy* food. That's over 400,000 children in our state. Yet 29% of those children do not qualify for free or reduced-price school meals *because their family's income is too high*.¹ Providing no-cost school meals can help.

In a typical school year, more than 60% of children are eligible for subsidized meals in our state. There are 28 North Carolina school districts where over 90% of children are enrolled in free or reduced-price school meal programs. It makes sense to provide them all at no cost.



Photo: US Department of Agriculture

School meals boost kids' academic success

Hunger makes it harder for kids to learn. Study after study shows that no-cost school meals improve academic outcomes for students and for schools. For example, a study here in North Carolina found a wide range of positive academic outcomes for schools offering meals to all students at no cost to their families.³

North Carolina schools that participate in a federal program providing all students with free breakfast and lunch are more likely to have met growth targets and to have a higher performance grade compared to schools with similar income levels that don't participate. Those schools also have higher academic performance on average compared to schools with similar income levels that don't participate.³

School Meal Debt and "Lunch Shaming"

Unfortunately "lunch shaming" practices are not uncommon in some North Carolina school districts.

These can include:

- Throwing away a student's meal when they can't pay;
- Providing "alternative meals" such as a cheese sandwich; or
- Barring participation in school events like graduation.

Schools are not prohibited from calling child protective services or debt collectors for school meal accounts that are in the red. To avoid such treatment, many hungry children will choose not to eat meals at all.



School meals improve students' physical & mental health

Researchers have found that students who participate in

free school meal programs have lower body mass index (BMI) and lower probability of obesity. Students who participate in free school meal programs also have fewer visits to the school nurse, as well as documented improvements in behavior and mental health indicators.⁴

School nutrition programs in North Carolina are struggling with meal debt

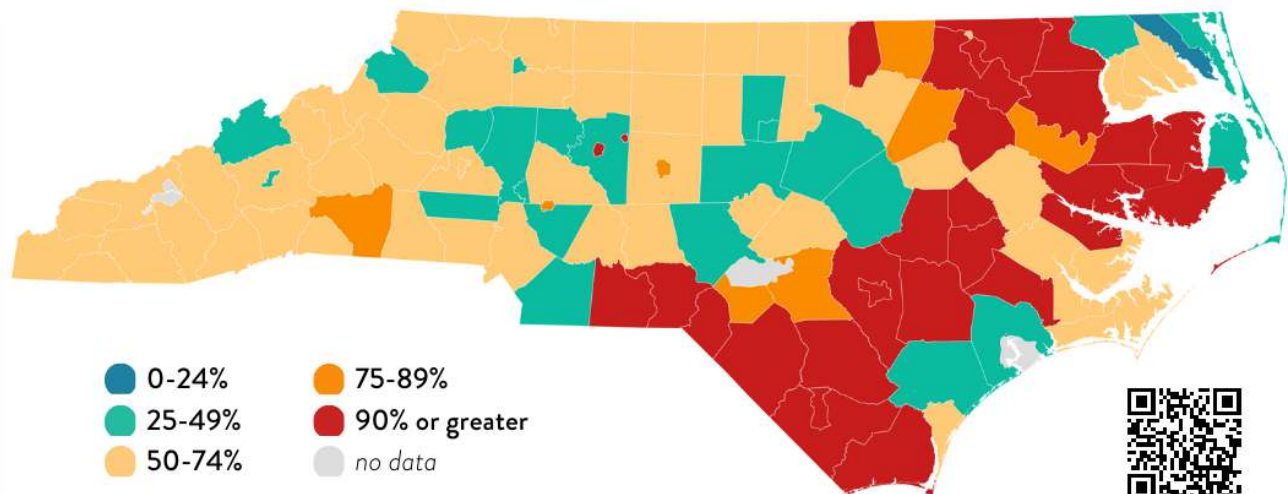
By November 2022, schools in North Carolina had accrued more than \$1.3 million in unpaid meal charges this school year. It's clear that families are struggling to pay for school meals. **The simplest solution to school meal debt is to make school meals available to all students in public schools at no cost to their families.**



"At the end of the day, these meals are important to all students. That's why it's important to just offer meals to all students, without an application, just like we offer them textbooks and bus service."

-Diane Pratt-Heavner, School Nutrition Association

North Carolina Students Enrolled in Free & Reduced Price Lunch 2019-20 School Year



Source: NC Child

Scan for interactive data!

Data Sources

¹ Harvey, Lynn. "School Nutrition Operations during the COVID-19 Pandemic." North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. <https://webservices.ncleg.gov/ViewDocSiteFile/47721>

² 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Study as reported by North Carolina Healthy Schools Whole Child Update, January 2023

³ Education Policy Initiative at Carolina. *The Effects of the Community Eligibility Provision on Educational Outcomes for Students in North Carolina, 2020*. https://epic.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1268/2021/09/EPIC_CEP-Policy-Brief_FINAL.pdf

⁴ Food Research & Action Center "[School Meals are Essential for Student Health and Learning](#)," 2019