

History of School Nutrition Policies and Programs in North Carolina

By: Michael Bennett

School nutrition policies and programs in North Carolina are legislated at the federal, state, and local levels through a complex patchwork of laws and regulations. Policies determine who is eligible to receive free or reduced-price school meals, the nutritional standards of the food, and, most importantly, the amount of funding given to school nutrition programs. School nutrition is intrinsically linked to food security, educational success, and other determining factors for child welfare. Understanding the history of policy across decades, presidential administrations, and state legislatures is fundamentally critical for charting a path forward in the equitable provision of healthy food for every child.

Like most other states, school nutrition policy in North Carolina is legislated primarily from the federal level through the **National School Lunch Act**. Before 1946, school lunches were provided by private welfare organizations and loans from federal relief programs. For example, Mary Hyde Kittredge formed the School Lunch Committee in 1909. Joined by other progressive women, the “penny lunch program” served meals in some of New York’s poorest neighborhoods.ⁱ World War II diverted farming resources from schools to support the Armed Forces, greatly diminishing the capacity of meal programs. After the war, Congress became weary of this decline and acted swiftly.ⁱⁱ



Signed into law by President Harry Truman in 1946, the National School Lunch Act created the National School Lunch Program which provides subsidies for schools to offer students lunch meals. In 1966, the **Child Nutrition Act** expanded existing federal legislation to grow child nutrition services at school. North Carolina statute requires participation from public schools in NSLP.ⁱⁱⁱ Over 800,000 students in the state receive free or reduced-price lunch.^{iv}

Before the federal government began providing breakfast for kids, the Black Panther Party organized the **Free Breakfast for Children Program**. The Panthers fed more than 20,000 kids across 23 cities in 1969. The success of the program highlighted the urgent need for poor students to be given nutritious meals. The federal government replicated the Panther's model and authorized the School Breakfast Program in 1975.^v The Reagan Administration in 1981 slashed federal spending for school lunch programs by \$1.5 billion, reduced portion sizes, and lowered the number of students eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch.^{vi} By the 1990s, the NSLP was outdated, underfunded, and failing its core mission to provide healthy meals to kids.^{vii}



During the Obama Administration, federal policy governing school nutrition was majorly overhauled for the first time in thirty years by the **Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010**. Spearheaded by First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move! initiative, this statute provided new funding for school meal programs and outlined updated nutritional guidelines. It limited sodium, sugar, and fat content, reduced portion sizes, required fruit and vegetable portions, and made accessing nutritional information easier. The Act also increased the reimbursement rate for breakfast and streamlined the process for applying to federal meals programs.^{viii}

Evidence has revealed mixed results from the policy. Studies determined that the nutritional content of school meals had improved as more schools participated in lunch programs. However, the new guidelines requiring healthier options were difficult to enact in some schools that did not have the existing infrastructure to make and store nutritious meals. In many districts, schools began losing revenue as profitable *à la carte* menu items were replaced by the new standards.^{ix} In 2018, the Trump Administration rolled back some of the new nutritional standards, allowing for more sodium and the sale of 1% flavored milks.^x Two years later, the

USDA sought to further weaken nutritional standards with proposals that would allow more pizza, burgers, and French fries in school cafeterias.^{xi}

Federal legislation works with state and local regulations in the state of North Carolina. While national policy lays the context for school nutrition policy, local statutes guide the on-the-ground implementation of school meal services. In 2005, the North Carolina legislature passed the **NC Eat Smart Nutrition Standards** which prohibited vending machines in elementary schools and placed limits on the number of calories per portion for vending machines in middle and high schools.^{xii}

**USDA Reimbursement Rates for
Certified School Food Authorities**
Effective from: July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020

National School Lunch Program		Less than 60% <small>Includes 7 cents for performance based reimbursement</small>	60% or More <small>Includes 7 cents for performance based reimbursement</small>
Contiguous States	Paid	0.39	0.41
	Reduced-Price	3.08	3.10
	Free	3.48	3.50
School Breakfast Program		Non-Severe Need	Severe Need
Contiguous States	Paid	0.31	0.31
	Reduced-Price	1.54	1.90
	Free	1.84	2.20
Special Milk Program		All Milk	Free Milk
Pricing Programs without Free Option		0.2150	N/A
Pricing Programs with Free Option		N/A	0.2150
Non-Pricing Programs		0.2150	N/A

Over half of the funding for school nutrition programs in North Carolina comes from the federal government. Local **School Food Authorities** (SFAs) administer programs based on federal laws, such as choosing menu items and setting prices. These meals are then reimbursed at a rate determined by the USDA. Student meal payments account for nearly a quarter of funding. Unlike over twenty other states, **North Carolina does not receive state funding beyond a required state revenue match.**^{xiii}

While much progress has been made in providing healthy school meals to students in North Carolina, many challenges and barriers remain. Food insecurity rates in North Carolina are among the highest in the country, with almost one in five children in the state facing hunger on a regular basis.^{xiv} Other states have taken more proactive steps in ensuring students are given healthy meals at school. With little state financial support, outside groups dedicated to child nutrition have been offering essential services. Organizations providing **food assistance, farm-to-school programs, and nutrition education** have become an integral component in the push for school nutrition policies in North Carolina.

Schools throughout the state continue to confront tough decisions between delivering healthy food to students and their own bottom lines. Support for schools, community action, and increased funding are crucial for the well-being of children in North Carolina.

Information Sources:

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- ^{iv} Andrews, Rebecca. "School Lunch Crucial in NC Nutritionally, Part of Policy Balancing Act." Carolina Public Press, 23 Oct. 2019, carolinapublicpress.org/29231/nc-school-lunch-crucial-nutritionally-part-of-policy-balancing-act/#:~:text=Free and reduced price lunch,level, according to the USDA.
- ^v Blakemore, E. (2018, February 06). How the Black Panthers' Breakfast Program Both Inspired and Threatened the Government. Retrieved June 19, 2020, from <https://www.history.com/news/free-school-breakfast-black-panther-party>
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- ^{viii} "Child Nutrition." *NEA*, www.nea.org/home/38649.htm.
- ^{ix} Prevention for the Health of North Carolina: Prevention Action Plan 93
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