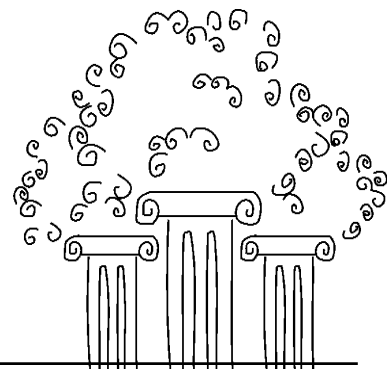




ENDING CHILDHOOD HUNGER IN NEBRASKA

Strategies for Improving & Maximizing
Child Nutrition Programs

LOW INCOME SELF SUFFICIENCY PROGRAM
Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest
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INTRODUCTION

Nebraska should be a place where all children have the adequate and nutritious foods they need to build healthy bodies and strong minds. Quality nutrition for children results in better health outcomes and increased educational achievement.¹ However, **one in seven children under 18 in Nebraska is food insecure**, meaning they can't count on their next meal² (*for additional state statistics, see appendix A*).

Federal child nutrition programs, including School Breakfast, School Lunch, the Summer Food Service Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program all combat hunger and improve child nutrition in our state. These federal programs are administered by the Nebraska Department of Education and contribute to



the health and well being of children. Federal authorization for these programs expires in 2009, giving our nation an opportunity to make key improvements as Congress reauthorizes the programs.

Child nutrition programs are particularly important now, as more families are struggling to meet basic needs in the economic downturn and as child obesity levels in the state are on the rise. One indicator of the impact of the recession on family food security is the recent rise in participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP – formally

known as Food Stamps). The SNAP program provides assistance for low-income people to purchase food. In the past year, an additional 15,200 families have accessed assistance. Currently, 7.7% of the population of the state receives SNAP benefits.³

At the same time, smaller food budgets often lead families to purchase cheaper, less nutritious foods. This is particularly concerning in Nebraska, where child obesity rates are rising. Nearly one in three (32%) Nebraska children is overweight, placing our state 14th highest in the nation for percentage of overweight children⁴. Federal child nutrition programs are effective in combating hunger and obesity by providing healthy, nutritious foods to children in schools and child care settings.

The time is now to improve these key programs on both the state and federal levels to contribute to stronger, healthier children now and in the future.

SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAMS

School Lunch Program

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) makes it possible for all school children in the United States to receive a nutritious lunch each and every school day. Students qualify in three categories: paid, reduced price, or free. In Nebraska, over 237,000 children benefited from the school lunch program in 2007.⁵ 42% of these children received free or reduced price meals. Statewide, 1,047 schools participate in the program. The School Lunch Program has become a staple of the American school day and provides a good meal to children to fuel their growth and learning.

School Breakfast Program

The School Breakfast Program plays an invaluable role in reducing childhood hunger and boosting school achievement by providing breakfast in the school setting. Any public school, non-profit school, or residential child-care institution can choose to participate in the school breakfast program. Similar to the School Lunch Program, federal funding covers the cost of food, while the state contributes to administrative costs. According to the Food Research and Action Center, School Breakfast improves school performance, reduces behavioral problems, improves children's diets and can help to reduce childhood obesity.

Focus on Omaha Public Schools

The Omaha Public School District, the largest school district in the state, works hard to meet the considerable challenge of feeding low-income students through school meals programs. In the 2006-2007 school year, 47.8% of students in the district qualified for the free lunch program and 10.1% qualified for the reduced price lunch program.

In the same school year, Omaha Public Schools reached 49.9% of low-income children through the school breakfast program. This is significantly higher than the state average and places the Omaha Public School District in the top ten in the nation for urban school districts.

Federal and state policy improvements, such as simplifying paperwork and investing in school capacity-building will help OPS serve even more students with healthy, nutrition meals.

Source: "School Breakfast in America's Big Cities," Food Research and Action Center, 2009 <http://www.frac.org/pdf/urbanbreakfast07.pdf>

Nebraska has room to grow in student participation in the school breakfast program. Of the 102,622 students that participate in the free and reduced price national school lunch programs, only 37,899 participate in the school breakfast program – just 36.9%.⁶ At this level of participation, Nebraska ranks near the bottom at 45th in the nation.

If Nebraska were to increase participation in the School Breakfast Program to 60% of the children served by the free and reduced price lunch program, our state could draw down an additional \$5,224,880 in federal funds and serve 23,674 more children.⁷

Nebraska also has room to grow in *school* participation in the School Breakfast Program. Currently, of the 992 schools that participate in the national school lunch program, only 684,

or 69%, participate in school breakfast⁸ - placing Nebraska 48th in the nation for school participation.

Schools can use the “Universal School Breakfast Option,” where breakfast is offered free to all children in school. It has proven to be a very effective strategy for increasing participation by low-income students. It also enables schools to serve breakfast in the classroom, which dramatically increases participation and boosts academic achievement. Increasing school and student participation in the School Breakfast program could dramatically improve child nutrition in Nebraska.

Challenges for School Meals Programs

The benefits of school meals programs are clear. However, several challenges prohibit children and schools from participating. These include the lack of start-up and capacity-building funding, unnecessary paperwork, and costs to families.

Particularly in low-income and small rural schools, funding to start school breakfast program is limited. Refrigeration space, additional staff, and outreach efforts are all a necessary to begin a school breakfast program. Providing start-up and expansion funds, particularly for schools that could offer Universal School Breakfast programs (where breakfast is offered free for all students in schools in low-income neighborhoods) is an effective way to increase school breakfast program participation by needy children while making the most of ongoing federal funding.

Paperwork for participation in both school breakfast and school lunch programs is also a challenge and serves as a barrier more than an admission tool. Rather than using cumbersome paper applications, high poverty school districts should be able to provide free meals to all children by using reliable statistical data (census data, household surveys, or other public records) to determine reimbursement, instead of individual applications.

Focus on Elliot Elementary School

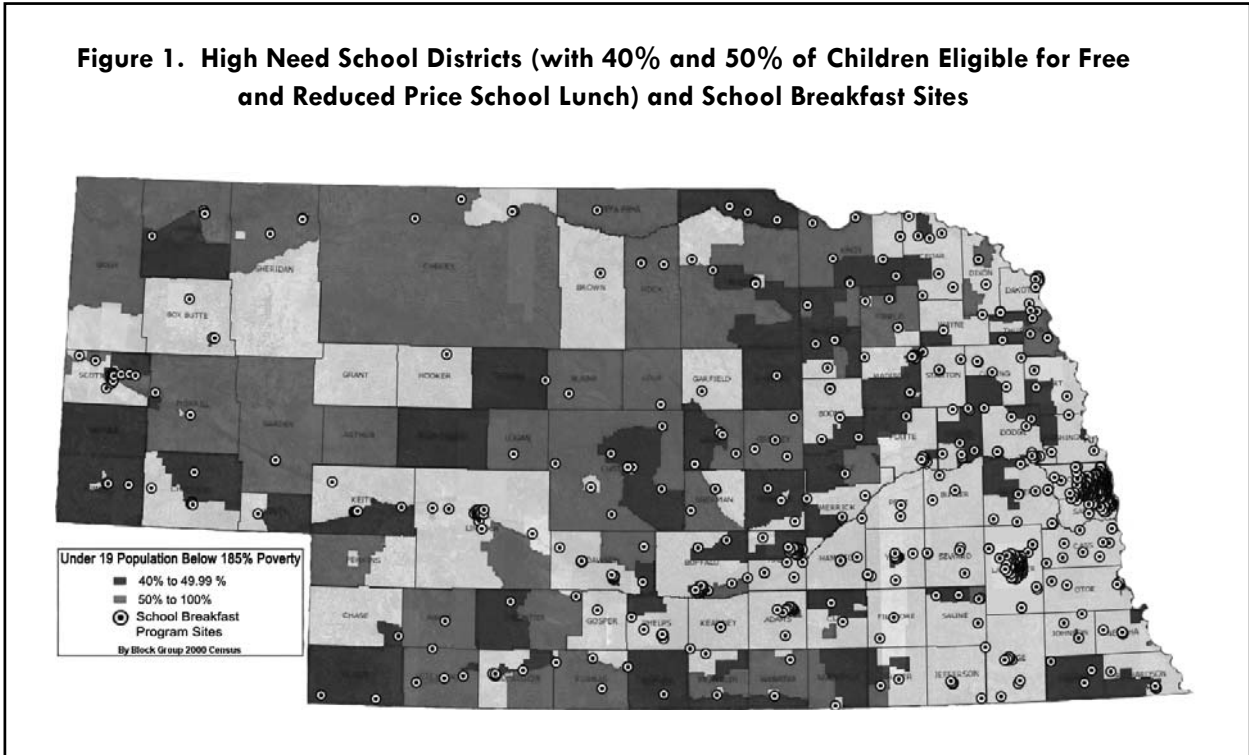
Today is the second to last day of school and the children at Elliot Elementary School in Lincoln, Nebraska are excitedly standing in line for breakfast. The kids say they like school breakfast because “you get a stomachache if you don’t eat” and because “it is good for your brain.” Every chair at every table is full as the children take turns eating breakfast. The students talk about all the fun activities planned for the last week of school, they talk about going to the museum and the pool, and they talk about their favorite foods that they eat during breakfast.

These kids, and thousands of others like them benefit from the School Breakfast Program. Elliot participates in what is known as the “Universal School Breakfast Option” which means that the school provides breakfast to all kids at no cost to the families. This approach reduces paperwork and encourages participation.

School Breakfast works here – it contributes to learning and helps kids stay healthy. Expanding the Universal School Breakfast approach to other schools in Nebraska and across the country will assure that kids start their day the right way - with fuel for their brains and energy for their bodies.

Finally, for many low-income families, even the cost of a reduced price meal can be a barrier to school breakfast and lunch participation. Additional children could benefit from school breakfast and lunch programs raising the income eligibility cut-off for free school breakfast and lunch to allow families with incomes up to 185% of the federal poverty limit to qualify and eliminate the reduced-price copayment.

The following map (Figure 1) illustrates low-income school districts that could benefit from start-up grant funding and current school breakfast programs that could benefit from paperwork simplification and elimination of the reduced price category.



FEDERAL AND STATE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

FEDERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Provide start-up and expansion funds for Universal Breakfast programs (where breakfast is offered free for all students) in “severe need” (low-income) schools.
2. Eliminate unnecessary paperwork that serves as a barrier to participation.
3. Raise the income eligibility cut-off for free school breakfast and lunch and eliminate the reduced-price copayment.

STATE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Provide capacity-building funds for school breakfast programs—including funding infrastructure, outreach, and supervision costs—with a preference for high need and/or low performing school districts.
- 2. Provide funding to allow schools to eliminate the reduced-price copayment for school breakfast and lunch for elementary schools.
- 3. Require schools to offer school breakfast in K-8 schools where 75% percent of lunches served are in the free and reduced-price eligible categories (for model state policy descriptions, see Appendix B).

OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS

Summer Food Service Program

Summer can be a time of increased hunger for children that rely on school meals programs during the school year. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is designed to reach hungry children during the summer and support programs such as summer camps and recreation centers. The result is children that are healthier, more food secure, and more likely to participate in summer learning programs.

The Summer Food Service Program offers reimbursements for snacks and meals for children in summer programs in low-income areas, which are currently defined as areas with more than 50% of the children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

The number of children accessing the free and reduced price national school lunch program provides a useful benchmark for those in need of summer food services. Nebraska currently serves less than one in ten low-income children that access free and reduced-price lunch through the Summer Food Service Program – only 9.3%. Our state serves approximately 8,800 children through SFSP, ranking 43rd in the nation.⁹ Nationwide, Summer Nutrition Programs only serve one in six of the low-income children who rely on subsidized meals during the school year.¹⁰

**Focus on
Howard Elementary School**

Howard Elementary School, located in the heart of Grand Island, Nebraska, houses over 440 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Approximately 90% of the students qualify for free or reduced price school lunch

In the summertime, the school remains full of activities, including an anti-drug and anti-gang education program and the “Take a Break” program that serves homeless youth. The Summer Food Service Program is very important to this community and to the success of summer programming. This year, Howard school served up to 200 students per day and extended the program in order to continue feeding children and promote participation in educational activities.

Howard School not only provides nutritious meals to children, they also promote a welcoming and educational environment during the summer months. Howard is a great example of a school that is making the most of the Summer Food Service Program for Grand Island children.

While participation of low-income children in the Summer Food Service Program is comparatively low, Nebraska has made significant gains in the participation of program sites. From 2007-2008, Summer Food Service Programs in the state grew from 93 sites to 190 sites.

Child and Adult Care Food Program

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is a key source of support for child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start programs, after-school programs, shelters and adult day care centers. The CACFP program provides reimbursement for food and meal preparation costs, ongoing training in the nutritional needs of children, and onsite assistance in meeting the program’s strong nutritional requirements. CACFP plays a vital role in creating and maintaining quality, affordable care for preschool and school-age children while also providing healthy food to eat. The CACFP program in Nebraska serves 476 child care centers and 2,789 family care homes in the state, and now serves over 38,700 children.¹¹

Challenges for Out-of-School Time Programs

Food can be an important draw for children to participate in summer programming, contributing to both increased nutrition for children and increased participation in learning programs. However, many afterschool programs are run by nonprofit organizations that lack additional funding

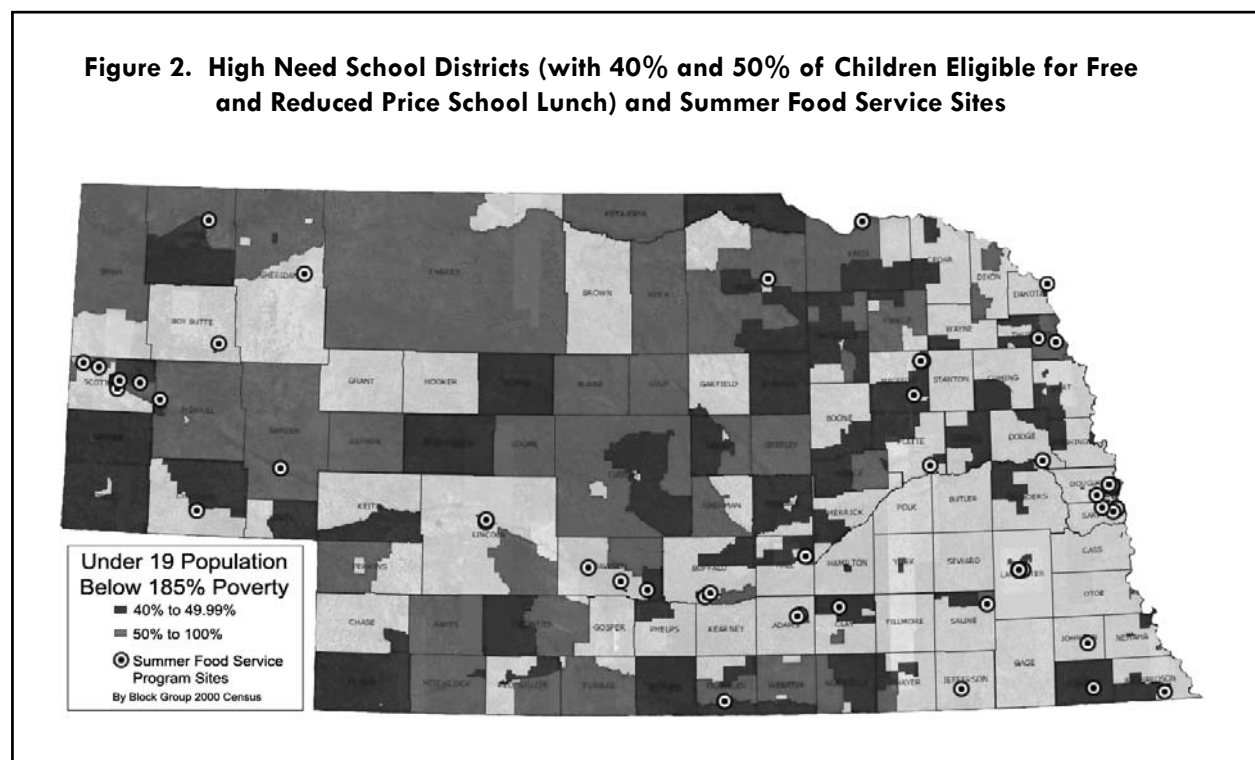


for food programs. Investing in the SFSP by improving reimbursement rates and providing grants for start-up, expansion, transportation and outreach would greatly improve the reach of summer food programs and improve the food security of children in the summertime.

Another challenge for afterschool programs is that more parents are working long hours, and children need larger, more filling meals. A pilot program run in ten states has provided funding for afterschool meals programs. The program has successfully met the food needs of children in extended care, and could be replicated nationwide.

Finally, many child care providers are financially unable to provide healthy, nutritious foods to the low-income children in their care. Federal nutrition programs currently offer reimbursements for snacks and meals for all children in afterschool or summer programs and in family child care located in low-income areas, which are currently defined as areas with more than 50% of the children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. A lower threshold of 40% would allow more child care providers in low-income neighborhoods to feed children and would ease administrative burdens for family child care providers.

The map below illustrates areas in Nebraska with significant numbers of low-income children that could benefit from Summer Food Service Program expansions, afterschool meals, and greater eligibility for participation in nutrition programs for child care providers.



FEDERAL AND STATE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

FEDERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Invest in Summer Food by improving the reimbursement rates and providing grants for start-up and expansion costs, transportation, and outreach.
2. Expand the Afterschool Meal Program pilot program to all states and the District of Columbia.

3. Improve the area eligibility test for family child care providers, afterschool meals and summer nutrition programs. A lower threshold (40%) would provide greater program access to more low-income children and would ease administrative burdens for family child care providers.

STATE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Provide funding for summer food outreach, start- up and expansion grants, and reimbursements. Allocate funding to support SFSP sponsors that participated during the previous summer.
2. Enact requirements for public school districts where 50% or more of the students enrolled qualify for free or reduced-price meals to operate a summer program (*for model state policy descriptions, see Appendix B*).

SUMMARY

Ending childhood hunger will require investment and action from multiple stakeholders, including parents, schools, states, and our nation as a whole. Federal reauthorization of child nutrition programs provides an excellent opportunity to fight childhood hunger and improve child health. State efforts can complement federal programs to do the same. Targeted improvements will both make the most of these programs and serve more children. Making sure that all children are well fed each day will mean healthier, better educated children with brighter futures. To learn more about child nutrition programs, and to take action in support of these initiatives, access <http://neappleseed.org/food/> .

Appendix A: Food Research and Action Center “State of the States” Scorecard for Nebraska

Demographics, Poverty and Food Insecurity

Population (2007)	
Total People	1,774,571
Children (Under Age 18)	447,478
Income and Poverty (2007)	
Median Household Income (2007)	\$47,085
Rank Among States	33
Total People Living In Poverty	192,822
Poverty Rate	11.2%
Rank Among States (Highest to Lowest)	34
Children (Under Age 18) Living In Poverty	65,309
Child Poverty Rate	14.9%
Rank Among States (Highest to Lowest)	34
Total People Living Below 185% of Federal Poverty Level	458,073
Food Insecurity Among Households (2005-2007, 3-Year Averages)	
Number of Households that are Food Insecure	68,000
Percent of Households that are Food Insecure	9.5%
Number of Households that are Very Low Food Secure	24,000
Percent of Households that are Very Low Food Secure	3.4%

Federal Nutrition Programs

School Breakfast Program (School Year 2006-2007)	
Average Daily Student Participation	52,887
Free and Reduced-Price Students	36,660
Paid Students	16,227
Change in Free and Reduced-Price Participation in Last 10 Years	122.2%
Free and Reduced-Price Student Participation Rate (Compared to School Lunch Participation)	36.7
Rank Among States	43
Additional Free and Reduced-Price Students Served if Participation Rate Reached 60%	23,339
Additional Federal Dollars State Would Receive if Participation Rate Reached 60%	\$4,967,008
Number of Schools Participating	694
School Participation Rate (Compared to Number of Schools Serving Lunch)	66.3%
Federal Funding for School Breakfast	\$9,382,564
School Breakfast Mandate in State Law (Yes/No)	No
National School Lunch Program (School Year 2006-2007)	
Average Daily Student Participation	237,002
Free and Reduced-Price Students	99,999
Paid Students	137,003
Number of Schools Participating	1,047
Federal Funding for School Lunch	\$43,194,004
Summer Nutrition Participation (July 2007)	
Average Daily Summer Nutrition Participation in July	8,886
July Summer Food Service Participation	4,837
July National School Lunch Participation in Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	4,049
Change in Average Daily Summer Nutrition Participation in Last 10 Years	10.3%
Low-Income Participation Rate (Compared to Regular Year Free and Reduced-Price School Lunch)	9.6
Rank Among States	40
Additional Low-Income Children Served if Participation Rate Reached 40%	28,194
Additional Federal Dollars State Would Receive if Participation Rate Reached 40%	\$1,699,228
Number of Summer Food Service Sponsors	33
Number of Summer Food Service Sites	93
Federal Funding for Summer Food Service Program	\$843,325
Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) (FY 2007)	
Number of Participating Family Child Care Homes	2,751
Family Child Care Home Average Daily Participation of Children	18,437
Change in Family Child Care Daily Participation in Last 10 Years	-23.5%
Number of Participating Child Care Centers (Includes Head Start)	453
Child Care Center Average Daily Participation of Children (Includes Head Start)	18,868
Change in Center Daily Participation in Last 10 Years	33.0%
Federal Funding for CACFP	\$21,680,909

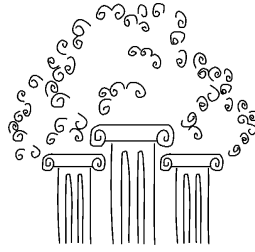
Appendix B:

Descriptions of Selected State Child Nutrition Initiatives

- 1. Massachusetts:** In total for 2008, \$5,024,557 million was allocated for breakfast and summer outreach, start up and expansion grants, and reimbursements. Of that, a minimum of \$300,000 is allocated for SFSP outreach.
- 2. Washington:** If the public school district operates a summer program and fifty percent or more of the students enrolled in the school qualify for free or reduced-price meals, the school district must implement a summer food service program in each of the operating public schools. Sites providing the meals should be open to all children in the area unless a compelling case can be made to limit access to the program. Schools may be exempt from implementing the Summer Food Service Program if they can demonstrate the availability of an adequate alternative summer feeding program. WA. LEGIS 287 (2005)
- 3. Washington:** The state allocates \$100,000 to support SFSP sponsors that participated during the previous summer. The funding is distributed based upon the proportion of the meals each sponsor served during the previous summer.
- 4. Connecticut:** School breakfast is required in K-8 schools where 80% of lunches served are Free and Reduced Price eligible. CONN. GEN. STAT. ANN. § 10-266w
- 5. Colorado:** The State may appropriate moneys for the creation, expansion, or enhancement of the School Breakfast program in low performing schools (any school that received an academic performance rating of low or unsatisfactory the preceding school year). The State appropriated \$250,000 for 2007-08, and \$350,000 for 2006-07. COL. REV. STAT. § 22-54-123.5 In 2008, the State also eliminated the reduced-price copayment for lunch in grades K-2. The state reimburses school districts \$0.40 per each reduced-price lunch served.

CITATIONS

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