

Universal school breakfast helps Alabama children learn and thrive

By Carol Gundlach, senior policy analyst

School breakfast helps kids learn: Children who start the day with breakfast learn better. They have better classroom participation and are less likely to skip school than kids who don't get breakfast. But tight family budgets and stressful mornings mean many children arrive at school hungry. School breakfast can help fill this gap.

School, bus and family schedules make it difficult to serve breakfast before the school day begins: School breakfast participation declined nearly 8% nationally after pandemic-era free breakfast ended. Only half of the children who get lunch at school also get breakfast.

The solution – universal free breakfast: School districts across the country have found that breakfast served after the first bell increases participation and helps kids learn.

Paperwork is a barrier for hungry children: Federal funding for traditional school breakfast relies on school's assessing students' eligibility for meal subsidies and reporting on how many free, reduced and paid meals are served. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) can reduce the paperwork for schools that serve a high share of children with low incomes. But many schools either can't make CEP work financially or worry about its impact on other federal grants.

What the Legislature can do: The Legislature can help feed Alabama's schoolchildren by appropriating Education Trust Fund (ETF) money to match federal

reduced and paid breakfast funds. Schools that want to offer free breakfast can use these matching funds to provide breakfast for all of their students at the start of the school day.

How this would work: The Legislature would appropriate money to match federal school breakfast grants. The Alabama State Department of Education would allow local schools to apply and would distribute these matching dollars. Schools that receive funding would report to, and be monitored by, the Department of Education.

The decision to offer free breakfast is optional: Whether to apply for matching funds would be totally voluntary for schools or systems. Those that want to participate can apply for the matching funds. Those that don't think it will work for them can choose not to apply.

How this would interact with CEP: The Community Eligibility Provision allows eligible schools to provide free meals for all their students. But some Alabama schools that are technically eligible for CEP can't make the federal reimbursement rate work for them. And other Alabama schools would like to offer free breakfast but don't want to adopt CEP fully. This proposal would allow schools to be made whole if they do adopt CEP or would allow schools to offer universal breakfast without having to adopt CEP fully.

Bottom line

An ETF appropriation of approximately \$14 million in 2023 dollars would allow every school in Alabama to offer breakfast to all of their students.