



# Meals Hungry Kids Can Count On

## Recommendations

To avoid worsening childhood hunger during these difficult economic times and protect our commitment to provide meals to hungry children, we urge legislators to protect current state investments that eliminate the school breakfast co-pay for all students and the school lunch co-pay for students in Kindergarten through 3rd grade. The budget should also sustain Meals for Kids funds that have for many years supported nutritious school breakfasts, helped districts start new programs and assist community groups to provide meals to kids during the summer months.

## Kids Can't Wait to Eat

As more and more families struggle with job losses, low wages, and reduced work hours, now more than ever children need the security of knowing that a nutritious breakfast and lunch are waiting for them each school day.

The current hunger report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture showed that 255,000 Washington families struggled to put food on the table—even before the economic crisis—and state-level data show that rural areas of Washington are particularly hard hit. We must act before childhood hunger in Washington grows.

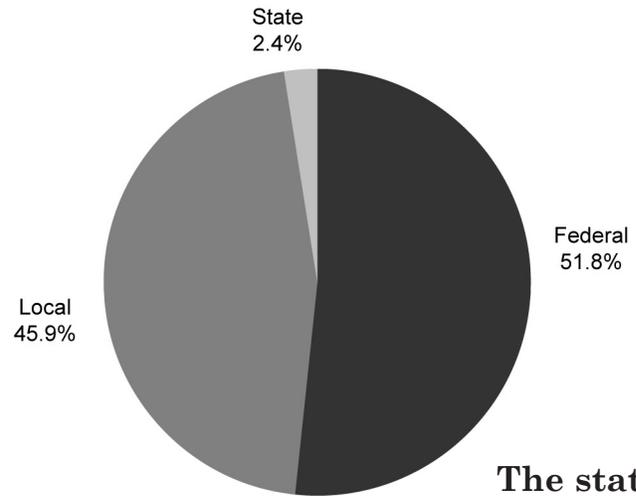
### Eliminate the co-pay

Beginning in 2006, the legislature recognized that all low-income children should receive free school meals

and eliminated the 30-cent co-pay for students qualifying for reduced-price school breakfast. In 2007, the 40-cent co-pay for students qualifying for reduced price lunch in kindergarten through third grade was also eliminated.

Getting rid of the co-pay works. What may seem like pocket change to many of us is a lot of money to kids with empty pockets. Participation in school breakfasts rose 50 percent statewide after the co-pay was eliminated, and in some districts participation doubled. Participation in the school lunch program for children in kindergarten through third grade also rose after the legislature eliminated the co-pay for these grades in 2007.

Feeding Hungry Kids bills introduced this session stated the legislature's intent to continue to expand elimination of the co-pay for school lunch until low-income students in all grades have access to free meals. While the bills have stalled due to the state's budget crisis, families are facing their own budget crises every day. In



**The state pays a fraction of the cost of Washington's school meals programs**



these difficult times, children need to be able to count on eating at school.

Continuing the current state funding for child nutrition programs makes good sense for kids and for school districts. Eliminating the co-pay increased meal participation, draw-

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**“The place to put the most state effort is into getting good foods to young people, where society will reap huge benefits in better school performance, reduced health bills and healthier individuals for years to come.”**

**—*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*,  
9/19/08**

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ing millions of dollars in extra federal funds to strapped local school districts. In 2006–07, school districts received nearly \$300 million in federal funds for school meals. In fact, state funds play a relatively small part in the total funding for school meals; federal funds and local district support are much greater.

All low-income students would benefit from free school lunches. It is critical that we not backtrack on progress toward that goal. We must preserve state funds that help children access nutritious meals where they learn and play.

### **Hunger doesn't stop in summer**

For many kids, summer is the hungriest time. When children are home in the summer months, parents struggle to stretch their budgets to make up for the loss of school meals.

The federal Summer Food Service Program fills the gap for hungry kids when school is out, but the availability of summer meals in Washington has declined in recent years—the number of children receiving summer meals has fallen from 16 percent of the number receiving free school lunch in 2003 to only 12 percent in 2007.

Among the reasons for this decline are cuts to parks and summer school programs. Organizations seeking to provide summer meals face complex paperwork requirements. Transportation to get kids to meal sites in rural areas is key, but costly. The program also isn't well known to all potential sponsors, such as churches.

Currently a small amount of start-up funding and added reimbursement are available to help community groups, school districts and tribes operate summer meal programs for low-income students. More is needed to keep summertime from being hungry-time in Washington. This year we must make sure we don't lose additional ground.

### **An essential investment**

Without these investments in feeding hungry kids, more families will join the growing lines at food banks across the state and make do with food that will fill the belly but may not give the body all it needs to thrive. More children will go hungry.

The consequences of failing to preserve our commitment are bad for kids and bad for the state. When kids don't get the fuel they need, they get sick more often and miss more school. Their concentration lags—in class they are thinking about their next meal, not what's on the blackboard. Hungry kids begin to think they must not be worth feeding.

## **For More Information**

For background on hunger in Washington and the Children's Alliance's End Childhood Hunger campaign, go to the End Childhood Hunger page at [www.childrensalliance.org](http://www.childrensalliance.org).

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