



2009 Legislative Session Review

Summary

Despite cuts in many programs, state funding for school and summer meals for low-income children was preserved in the final 2009-11 budget. Going into the session, our goal was to eliminate the co-pay low-income children pay for reduced-price school lunch in all elementary grades, expanding elimination of the co-pay beyond K-3rd grades and ensuring that all low-income students have access to free meals.

However, the severity of the budget crisis and the failure of Feeding Hungry Children legislation (HB 1416 and SB 5361) to receive a hearing in the fiscal committees led us to adjust our goals.

We succeeded in protecting funding for elimination of the co-pay for all school breakfasts and for school lunches in kindergarten through third grade. We also protected the Meals for Kids breakfast subsidy; start-up funding for breakfast, lunch and summer meals; and a small subsidy for the operation of summer meals.

Background

Beginning in 2006, the legislature recognized the importance of school meals to all low-income children and got rid of a major barrier to participation by eliminating the 30-cent co-pay for students qualifying for reduced-price school breakfast. In 2007, the legislature eliminated the 40-cent co-pay for students qualifying for reduced-price lunch in kindergarten through third grade.

Getting rid of the co-pay works. Participation in school breakfasts rose 50 percent state-wide after the co-pay was eliminated, and in some districts participation doubled. Participation in the lunch program in K-3rd grade also rose after the legislature eliminated the co-pay for K-3rd grades in 2007.



Tegra Stone Nuess

Feeding Hungry Children bills introduced this session stated the legislature's intent to continue eliminating the co-pay for school lunch until low-income students in all grades have access to free meals.

What happened

The coalition that successfully advocated for elimination of the co-pay in 2006 and 2007 (the Children's Alliance, Washington School Nutrition Association, Lutheran Public Policy Office and the Anti-Hunger and Nutrition Coalition) conducted broad outreach to legislators during the interim between the 2008 and 2009 sessions. Rep. Eric Pettigrew helped recruit a new House champion, Rep. Pat Sullivan, and Sen. Joe McDermott continued his long-term commitment to getting food to hungry students.

House Bill 1416 had 37 co-sponsors from both parties and a approval in the House Education Committee. Senate Bill 5361 had 15 sponsors and was approved by the Senate Early Learning and K-12 Education Committee. However, the fiscal notes on the bills ranged from \$2.3 million to \$3.5 million, and fiscal committees of both houses were severely limiting the bills they approved that would have a fiscal impact. When both committees did not hear the bills, the coalition turned its focus to protecting current state funding for school meals.

By Hunger Action Day, March 20, it was clear that the goal for 2009 must be protecting existing funds. Coalition members delivered messages to all legislators asking them to retain current state investments in child nutrition programs. Child nutrition programs were protected in the Senate and House budgets, as they had been in the Governor's budget.

Impact

The current economic downturn means more families are struggling to keep food on the table. Continued state investment in child nutri-

tion programs means that all low-income school children know they can have a healthy breakfast. And our youngest school children have the security of free school lunch. These stable programs allow parents to focus limited resources on food and other basic needs at home. Because children of color are more likely to live in low-income households, the retention of support for child nutrition programs is of particular importance to their families.

Next steps

The coalition supporting elimination of the lunch co-pay for all grades will meet soon and discuss next steps. School meals occupy a key role in the safety net for low-income students.

Making child nutrition programs easy to access is an essential element of improving our safety net as times get tougher.

All signs say that this summer will be a hard one for hungry children. The Summer Food Service Program

in Washington has been shrinking over the past five years; in 2007 only 12 percent of children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals had access to summer meals in their community. As the Children's Alliance moves forward with its End Childhood Hunger Washington plan, summer hunger will move to the forefront, as will continued access to school meals for all students who need them.

Resources

Parent resources: An easy way for families to learn about potential assistance and see if they are eligible. www.parenthelp123.org

Food Research and Action Center: Up-to-the-minute information on national anti-hunger programs and initiatives. www.frac.org

End Childhood Hunger in Washington: Find [the five-year plan](#) by searching on our website.

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