



June 10, 2008

Members of the Joint Task Force on Basic Education Finance:

**Hungry Kids Can't Learn. There is no stronger statement in support of inclusion of school nutrition in the state's definition of Basic Education.** For many years, a coalition of organizations has worked on behalf of all of Washington's children to insure that every school day offers students the option of a nutritious school breakfast and lunch. This coalition includes the Washington School Nutrition Association, the Children's Alliance, Lutheran Public Policy Office and the Anti-Hunger and Nutrition Coalition.

Session by legislative session, this coalition has built support for insuring that children arrive in the classroom ready to learn through strategic state investments in per-meal breakfast reimbursement, start-up and expansion funds for schools needing them to offer meals, and, most recently, elimination of the breakfast and K- grade 3 co-pays required of parents and grandparents of students qualifying for "reduced-price" meals.

This year this coalition's request was supported by Superintendent of Public Instruction Terry Bergeson, Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA), Washington State School Directors Association (WSSDA), Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP), Washington State Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and School Nurses of Washington (SNOW).

The coalition's proposal to the Joint Task Force has two parts: (1) Include school nutrition in the state's definition of basic education; and (2) Eliminate the reduced price lunch co-pay for grades pre-K and 4-12. The co-pay proposal, which costs \$9.3 million for the 2009-11 biennium, will increase lunches served by 2.16 million and produce an additional \$4.47 million in additional federal reimbursement for school district meal programs. Clearly, feeding hungry kids has numerous benefits.

The following briefing paper outlines the federal basis for school meals programs, the current and potential state investment in school meals, significant research on the benefits of investment in school meal programs and the importance of including school nutrition in the basic education definition.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the basic education financing process. For further information, please contact Mitch Denning (360) 280-1930 or Lincoln Pierce, (253) 683-6911.

## **Briefing Paper**

### **School Nutrition Programs: An Essential Element in Educational Success**

#### Background: Federal and State Investment

As early as 1917 the U.S. Surgeon General said, "This is expensive stupidity...trying to educate children with half-starved bodies." In 1946 Congress approved the National School Lunch Act, in part as a response to reports of widespread undernutrition in recruits for World War II. The Act stated:

"The national school lunch bill provides basic, comprehensive legislation for aid, in general, to the States in the operation of school lunch programs as permanent and integral parts of their school systems...."

From 1946 to 2008, Congress added subsidies for free and reduced-price meals and, in 1971, created the School Breakfast Program. From the start, Congress realized that the program must provide a national nutrition safety net. Efforts in the 1980s and 1990s to "block grant" the program to states were soundly defeated; in fact, during the welfare reform debates in the late 1990s, a new term for political defeat was coined: being "school-lunched."

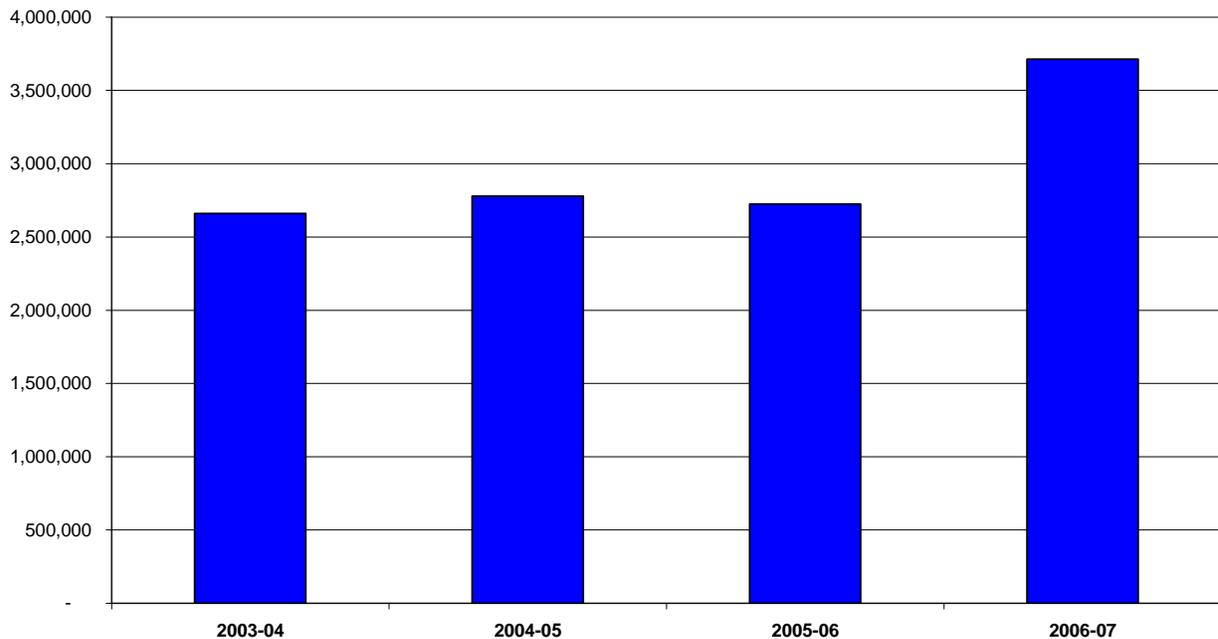
Here in Washington, the Governor's Task Force on Hunger reported in 1988 that school meal programs were underutilized, denying thousands of students the opportunity for nutritious meals at school. Beginning in 1989, the Washington State Legislature recognized the significance of school meals in supporting and enabling educational progress with a series of policy bills and appropriations:

- 1989: a school breakfast mandate was approved requiring that breakfast be served in all schools where 40% or more of students participating in the lunch program qualified for free or reduced-price meals.
- 1993: Meals for Kids legislation added \$5 million in per-meal reimbursement for free and reduced-price school breakfasts and start-up and expansion funds to help schools with equipment and other start-up costs.
- 2004: the Act for Hungry Families included a mandate for school lunch in elementary schools where 25% or more of the students qualified for free or reduced-price meals. In addition, legislation requiring the development of a model school nutrition and physical activity policy and encouraging school boards to adopt such policies passed the legislature.
- 2005: a bill to strengthen the 1989 breakfast mandate was approved.
- 2006: major investment in school breakfast was approved to both increase the per-meal reimbursement for free and reduced-price breakfast and to eliminate the 30 cent per meal "co-pay" required for students qualifying for reduced-price breakfasts. Washington was the first state in the nation to eliminate the co-pay.
- 2007: An initiative to continue to increase access to nutritious meals by low-income students by eliminating the 40 cent co-pay for school lunches was partially funded by the legislature; students in Kindergarten through third grade have no co-pay.
- Also in 2007, SB 5093, the Cover all Kids law, acknowledged the key role school nutrition programs play in the health of our children by outlining nutrition standards for schools to employ by 2010. The Washington Health Foundation introduced

legislation to implement Coordinated School Health teams in schools. Nutrition is one of the eight components of a coordinated school health model that supports the whole child for the purposes of academic achievement and long-term good health.

Currently, a coalition of organizations is working to expand the elimination of the school lunch co-pay to all grades, including pre-K. Meanwhile, participation in the breakfast and lunch programs is growing exponentially.

**Impact of Elimination of the Reduced-Price Co-Pay for  
School Breakfast in 2006  
on the Number of Reduced-Price School Breakfasts Served**



The Research: Hungry Kids Can't Learn

The Center on Hunger and Poverty at Brandeis University published a summary of scientific research on the impact of hunger and food insecurity on children in 2002.<sup>1</sup> Top adverse consequences include:

**Health**

- Poorer overall health status and compromised ability to resist illness
- Elevated occurrence of health problems such as stomach aches, headaches, colds, ear infections, and fatigue
- Greater incidence of hospitalizations

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Dr. J. Larry, **The Consequences of Hunger and Food Insecurity for Children: The Evidence from Current Scientific Studies**, Center on Hunger and Poverty, Heller School for Social Policy and management, Brandeis University, 2002.

### **Psychosocial and Behavioral**

- Higher levels of aggression, hyperactivity, and anxiety as well as passivity
- Difficulty getting along with other children
- Increased need for mental health services

### **Learning and Academic**

- Impaired cognitive functioning and diminished capacity to learn
- Lower test scores and poorer overall school achievement
- Repeating a grade in school
- Increased school absences, tardiness, and school suspension

The Food Research and Action Center releases a School Breakfast Scorecard each year that outlines the latest research on education and health outcomes associated with school meals.<sup>2</sup> These include:

- ❖ Eating breakfast improves math grades, vocabulary skills and memory.
- ❖ Children who eat breakfast at school— closer to class and test-taking time – perform better on standardized tests than those who skip breakfast or eat breakfast hours earlier at home.
- ❖ Students who participate in school breakfast have lower rates of absence and tardiness and exhibit decreased behavioral and psychological problems.
- ❖ Researchers have discovered that children who eat school breakfast have fewer discipline problems and visit school nurses' offices less often.
- ❖ The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports that children with access to school breakfast eat a better overall diet, less fat, and more magnesium, vitamin C and folate.
- ❖ Other USDA research shows that children who participate in school breakfast eat more fruits, drink more milk, and consume a wider variety of foods than those who do not eat school breakfast or who have breakfast at home.

While efforts to expand access to school meals have often focused on low-income students where family resources may not insure a nutritious diet, all children need food to fuel educational achievement. **According to the Census Bureau, only 35% of parents of children ages 6 to 11 report eating breakfast each day with their children.** Data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation show that most American families of school-age children do not eat breakfast together every day. On average, only 22 percent of parents of middle- and high- school- aged students report eating breakfast daily with their children. These percentages are similar across income levels, race, areas of the country, and community type (urban, suburban or rural).

### Including School Nutrition in the Definition of Basic Education and Funding the Reduced Price Copy for Pre-K and Grades 4-12 are Essential

Based on the evidence presented above, verified by conversations with educators in all parts of the state, school nutrition programs are essential building blocks for educational success. The Washington Education Association recently recognized this in a resolution that stated in part, "WEA believes that a free school lunch program for all would increase school attendance and guarantee that individual students would not be distracted from learning because of a lack of sound nourishment."

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<sup>2</sup> Food Research and Action Center, **School Breakfast Scorecard 2007**, December 2007.

Transportation and other educational support services are included in the current definition of basic education, yet nutrition is not. The Joint Task Force on Basic Education Finance has the opportunity to remedy this serious oversight by recommending that the definition of basic education be expanded to include school nutrition.

In addition, the coalition is recommending that the 2009 Legislature expand its commitment of focusing on students to do their best in school through access to healthy school lunches by including a **\$9.3M** allocation for the 2009-11 budget years to cover the cost of the Reduced Price Lunch copay of \$.40 for pre-K and 4-12 grade students. The funding of the current request will mean that Washington will be the first state in the nation to have a two-tiered breakfast and lunch program – free and full pay.

Also, this proposal would harmonize the school lunch guidelines with the WIC guidelines of 185% of poverty to qualify for assistance with no out-of-pocket expense. The proposal would also provide the opportunity to access lunch for an additional 6,000 students per day, who are not eating lunch at school. For the 2009-11 biennium, this translates into an additional **2.16 million** lunches served which would increase Federal support of school districts by **\$4.47M**.

Submitted by Washington School Nutrition Association, Lutheran Public Policy Office, the Children's Alliance and the Anti-Hunger and Nutrition Coalition to the Joint Task Force on Basic Education Finance, June 10, 2008. For further information, contact Mitch Denning (360) 280-1930 or Lincoln Pierce, (253) 683-6911.