

# School Meals By The Numbers



More than **850,000** students participate in school meals every day.



Nearly **60%** of children participating in NC's school meal programs qualify for free- or reduced-price lunches.



School food authorities only have about **\$1** to spend on ingredients per day per lunch for students.



## FARMs for School Meals

Benefiting students, farmers, and local economies.

**Funds to Advance Rural Markets (FARMs) for School Meals invests in North Carolina farms, rural economies across the state, and North Carolina school children.**

**Today, we are sure that only about 2% of funds spent on produce in North Carolina's public schools is for produce grown in North Carolina. North Carolina's agricultural sector is the state's largest economic driver and largest employer, and yet many schools are not able to put local products on their menus because their budgets are very tight; they spend just over \$1/meal.**

**FARMs for School Meals will give schools what they need to buy more North Carolina grown food for our kids and give schools flexibility to provide meals to students who are unable to pay. In receiving funds, schools will purchase North Carolina grown products where they are currently using products from out of state.**

**That keeps money in North Carolina, feeds our kids local food, and supports North Carolina farmers.**

## School Lunch Debt

School lunch debt happens when either reduced-price or full-priced families are not able to pay for the school meal. There are many reasons why working families may struggle to make these payments.

Regardless, the outcomes are challenging:

### HUNGER

Some districts opt to refuse a child a meal if they owe money on their account. In this case, the district does not accrue much lunch debt, but the child receives no meals until the debt is paid.

### SHAME

Some districts opt to give an alternative meal after a child's account reaches a certain level of debt. This identifies the child as owing money on their account, stigmatizing the child and their family. We know that some children refuse to accept the alternative meal to avoid being identified by peers as a student with lunch debt, meaning they go hungry.

### DEBT

Some districts opt to provide a standard school lunch to the children who cannot pay, which builds up a substantial amount of debt in the child nutrition program. If the nutrition programs are in the red at the end of any school year, the school board is on the hook for those debts. Debt in the school nutrition program means there is less money available for teachers, teacher assistants, STEM programs, school improvements, and more.

## Benefits of FARMs for School Meals



Smaller number of school nutrition programs in need of funds from their local boards of education to address deficit spending.



Greater participation in school meals resulting in more revenue for child nutrition programs.



More flexibility in school nutrition budgets to ensure that each student receives a nutritious meal, regardless of their ability to pay.



Reduced need to make a choice between fiscal responsibility and providing nutritious meals regardless of their ability to pay.



Increased funds available for child nutrition programs to spend on quality food.



Increased revenue for local farmers and producers.



Supporting family farms by providing consistent, large institutional purchases.



Increased money circulating in rural economies.