



## NORTH CAROLINA ALLIANCE FOR HEALTH

### NORTH CAROLINA SCHOOL MEALS AND FARM TO SCHOOL

- More than 850,000 children participate in school meal programs in NC every day.<sup>i</sup>
- Nearly 60% of children participating in NC's school meal programs qualify for free- or reduced-price lunches.<sup>ii</sup>
- Given current federal reimbursement rates, school food authorities only have about \$1 to spend on ingredients per day per lunch for students.<sup>iii</sup>
- 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 for the district are challenging:
  - 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 children receive no meals until the debt is paid.
  - 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.
  - 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.
- Increasing money available from the state for school nutrition programs to purchase local products results in many wins:
  - Increased funds available for child nutrition programs to spend on quality food and programs that in turn attract greater participation.
  - 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.
  - Stronger financial position for school nutrition programs, reducing the need for programs to make a choice between fiscal responsibility and providing students with nutritious meals regardless of students' ability to pay.
  - Smaller number of school nutrition programs in need of funds from their local boards of education to address deficit spending, so school boards are less often called upon to move funds designated for salaries, technology, books or other important items to the school nutrition program.
  - Increased revenue for local farmers and producers.
  - Saving family farms by providing consistent, large institutional purchases.
  - Increased money circulating in rural economies.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/2239-percent-of-students-enrolled-in-free-and-reduced-lunch#detailed/2/any/false/1603,1539,1381,1246,1124,1021,909,857,105,118/any/4682>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://schoolnutrition.org/aboutschoolmeals/schoolmealtrendsstats/#5>