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# School Budget Cuts Threaten to Increase Summer Childhood Hunger

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Texas households experience food insecurity at a rate of nearly 19 percent (one of the highest in the nation). Kids without access to meals are less likely to perform well in school and more likely to be at risk of poor health. While most children have access to meals during the year through the national school lunch program, participation in summer nutrition programs is drastically low, causing food insecurity rates to jump during summer months.

The United States Department of Agriculture gives states the option to provide a federally funded meal program for children during the summer. Without access to these meals many low-income families struggle to make ends meet. Yet only 11 percent of those eligible for free or reduced-priced meals receive food during the summer, marking a need to increase access to the program.<sup>1</sup>

The summer food program in Texas is administered by the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA). In 1993 state legislators passed Senate Bill (SB) 714, which required schools with 60 percent or more of their students receiving free or reduced-priced meals during the school year to offer a summer nutrition program. And during the last session, the 2011 Texas Legislature passed SB 89 which expands the number of school districts that must participate by requiring schools with only 50 percent or more of their students receiving free or reduced-priced meals during the school year to offer a summer nutrition program.



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## STRUCTURE OF SUMMER NUTRITION PROGRAMS



### USDA

reimburses the state for meals served.

### TDA

runs the program in accordance with law.

### Sponsors

school districts and non-profits that contract to operate summer meals programs in local communities.

### Sites

physical locations where meals are served and monitored by sponsor—schools, churches, community centers, libraries, etc.

## SCOPE OF THE BILL

168

school districts are now required by this law to offer summer meals. This should increase access to summer meals for **159,000** more children and increase state-wide participation to 16 percent up from 12 percent.

\$3.5M

in federal funding to local communities across the state, a much needed boost during these times of high unemployment and school budget cuts.

Unfortunately

248

school districts (at publication) have requested waivers from the requirement meaning many children will have not have access to the program and participation is likely to decrease across the state.

[CLICK HERE](#) for the latest county summer data as compared to school lunch participation.

## WAIVERS

Texas law gives school districts the option to waive out of the requirement to provide a summer meal program under the following four circumstances:

- construction,
- fewer than 100 children,
- transportation challenges, and
- a catch all “other.”

The primary reason school districts request waivers is because of construction projects on campuses that would interfere with the program. The second most requested waiver is the catch all “other” category. This can include reasons such as the ISD has secured another sponsor for their community, or they do not have the funds to run the program.

The law requires that the school district make an effort to find an alternative sponsor or site for the program if they are going to submit a waiver, but there is no penalty to the school district if no replacement is found.

## PROGRAM CHALLENGES FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Operating the summer meal program presents a wide range of challenges, even for school districts experienced in operating the free lunch program during the school year. The primary concern is running a financially solvent program. Federal meal reimbursement rates are modest, and haven’t kept pace with food costs. This summer, school districts are particularly concerned about covering program expenses because of cuts to their operating budgets. These cuts mean schools are struggling to keep buildings air-conditioned, transport children to feeding sites, and pay kitchen staff to prepare meals.

School food service providers all have varying levels of fixed and variable costs. Reimbursement for the program is on a per-meal basis, meaning school food service providers need to achieve a certain level of participation to cover their costs associated with running the program. High participation is the key to running a financially solvent program.

# Threatens to Increase Summer Childhood Hunger

## BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

The two largest barriers school districts face to achieve high participation are lack of transportation and insufficient outreach. Many rural school districts face transportation barriers involving long distances between schools and households, while urban schools are faced with safety concerns for walking children. Most school districts do not have the budgets to keep busses running during the summer, and since many children in need of the program use the bus to get to school, districts experience low turnout at their sites. These participation rates often lead school leadership to conclude that these meals are not needed.

Organizations around the country are looking to address these barriers to participation. One Texas non-profit caught national attention for its innovative solution. CitySquare, a non-profit summer food sponsor based in Dallas, pioneered an urban meal delivery program which used housing complexes as meal sites. Teams drove from site to site along a predetermined route delivering and serving meals. Most routes were run twice a day bringing both breakfast and lunch.

Low participation can also result from a lack of program outreach. Children, parents and other summer childcare providers often don't know the meals are available, whether they are eligible, or when schools are open. Getting this information out to the community can be difficult as fliers get lost in backpacks and automated calls go unanswered or ignored. Strong community networks are required to assure families understand they are eligible for the meals and where to find them.

## SOLUTIONS TO FILL THE NUTRITION GAP THIS SUMMER

In this time of school budget crisis, it is critical for community organizations to step in to assure that Texas children remain fed and healthy this summer. If your organization has the capacity to provide any assistance for the summer program, including building space, transportation, outreach, or volunteers, we urge you to approach your school district or local summer meals sponsor and let them know you value these programs and want to help.

Eligible organizations include non-profit and faith-based organizations, day camps, and units of local government, like a city parks and recreation department. For-profit business sites can also participate by becoming a feeding site.

For assistance finding a sponsor close to you, contact Jonathan Lewis.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Average daily participation of 2011 Summer Food Program taken from <http://squaremeals.org/Programs/SummerFeedingPrograms/SummerFeedingProgramStatistics.aspx> and number eligible received through a data request from TDA.



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