

RCW 28A.235.135 School meals at no charge to young students.

(1) (a) In accordance with (b) and (c) of this subsection, beginning with the 2023-24 school year, each school district shall provide breakfast and lunch each school day to any student who requests a breakfast, lunch, or both. The school district must provide the meals at no charge to the student and without consideration of the student's eligibility for a federally reimbursed free or reduced-price meal. Meals provided under this section must be nutritiously adequate and qualify for federal reimbursement under the school lunch program or the school breakfast program, and students are not eligible for more than one meal in a meal service period.

(b) The requirements in (a) of this subsection apply to public schools in which:

(i) Educational services are provided to students in any of the grades of kindergarten through four; and

(ii) 30 percent or more of the enrolled students meet federal eligibility requirements for free or reduced-price lunches.

(c) The obligation to provide breakfast and lunch to students under this subsection (1):

(i) Begins in the 2023-24 school year for schools in which 40 percent or more of the enrolled students meet federal eligibility requirements for free or reduced-price lunches;

(ii) Begins in the 2024-25 school year for schools in which the percentage of enrolled students that meet federal eligibility requirements for free or reduced-price lunches is at least 30 percent and less than 40 percent; and

(iii) Does not apply to schools participating in the United States department of agriculture's community eligibility provision under RCW 28A.235.300 that have not completed the duration of the provision's four-year cycle.

(2) The office of the superintendent of public instruction shall reimburse school districts, subject to the requirements of subsection (1) of this section, on a per meal reimbursement basis for meals that are not already reimbursed at the United States department of agriculture's free rate. The additional state reimbursement amount must be the difference between the United States department of agriculture's free rate and the United States department of agriculture's paid rate.

(3) School districts, in accordance with RCW 28A.235.160, may be exempted from the requirements of this section.

(4) To maximize federal funding, school districts must continue collecting free and reduced-price meal eligibility applications where applicable and run direct certification at least monthly in accordance with RCW 28A.235.280. School districts shall also annually monitor data for eligibility in the United States department of agriculture community eligibility provision and apply where eligible as required in RCW 28A.235.300.

(5) For the purposes of this section, the following definitions apply:

(a) "Public school" has the same meaning as in RCW 28A.150.010.

(b) "School breakfast program" has the same meaning as in RCW 28A.235.160.

(c) "School lunch program" has the same meaning as in RCW 28A.235.160.

(6) This section governs school operation and management under RCW 28A.710.040 and 28A.715.020, and applies to charter schools established under chapter 28A.710 RCW and state-tribal education

compact schools established under chapter 28A.715 RCW to the same extent as it applies to school districts.

(7) The requirements in this section shall lapse if the federal reimbursement for any school breakfasts or lunches is eliminated. [2023 c 379 s 2.]

Intent—2023 c 379: "(1) The legislature recognizes that adequate childhood nutrition is indispensable for proper intellectual, academic, and social development. However, many Washington families continue to face economic and other challenges that impact students' ability to consistently access nutritional meals that support their growth and well-being.

(2) The legislature has acknowledged the widespread but often concealed harms of childhood hunger by enacting legislation in recent years to address this issue. For example, in 2018, the legislature established a breakfast after the bell program in high-needs schools, in 2021, the legislature eliminated lunch copays for qualifying students, and in 2022, the legislature expanded school participation in the federal community eligibility provision, a program that provides no-charge meals for all students at participating schools.

(3) These efforts and others have significantly increased student access to meals provided without charge, but the problems of food insecurity, with its lasting physiological and psychological harms, remain a reality for too many families, too many schools, and too many children.

(4) The legislature recognizes also that the myriad difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic uniquely impacted school districts and food delivery systems. While the challenges of responding to the unprecedented disruptions of a global pandemic continue to reverberate in public schools, school districts, through hard work, federal approvals, and appropriate financial supports, successfully demonstrated their ability to provide meals without charge to all requesting students. However, federal provisions permitting meals to be served at no charge to all students during the school year have expired, so the task of broadly responding to student meal needs has returned to the states.

(5) Although childhood hunger persists, the legislature recognizes that the state and school districts have the needed infrastructure and ability to respond to the issue, including the potential to access or leverage federal funds that may become available for school meal programs. The legislature, therefore, intends to continue its multiyear effort to eliminate hunger and food insecurity within public schools by expanding the provision of meals without charge to the state's youngest K-12 students." [2023 c 379 s 1.]