



Elevating Tribal Priorities in School Meal Services

National Indian Education Association



The National Indian Education Association (NIEA) is the nation's largest and most inclusive organization advocating for comprehensive culture-based educational opportunities for American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians.

Background

Strong school meal services are essential to equity in access to educational opportunity. Students must have access to the necessary resources to focus and thrive in the classroom, a nearly impossible feat when students are hungry. High-quality education services require healthy meals for all students to meet their full potential.

In tribal communities, school meals have the potential to expand vibrant traditional foodways, elevating the importance of food sovereignty among our youngest citizens and future leaders. From introducing our students to traditional foods like bison and wild rice, to integrating agricultural sciences into the classroom and growing food on campus, tribes are innovating to develop unique programs that meet the cultural and academic needs of Native students. Our food service laws, regulations, and funding must provide the flexibility and support for such programs to thrive.

National Landscape

Research has shown that healthy meal services increase test scores among students. Low-income students benefit even more from healthy school lunch and breakfast programs, increasing their scores at a 40 percent higher rate than their peers when they have access to healthy school lunches.

Nearly 4 in 5 American Indian and Alaska Native students are eligible to receive free or reduced lunches. This is even more pronounced in tribal areas, where 38 percent of eligible Native students attend rural schools. About 47 percent of eligible rural Native students attend schools where more than 75 percent of students receive free and reduced lunches.

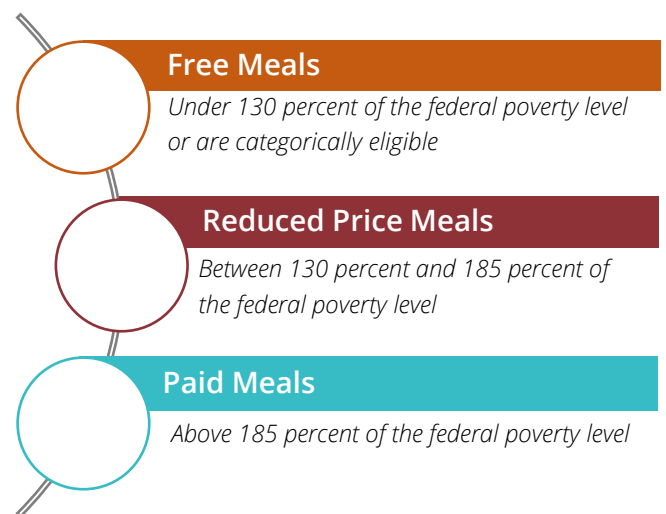
Laws that Support Meal Services in Schools

Congress has authorized a number of programs and services operated through the Department of Agriculture to provide access to meals in schools. The following are the largest of these programs:

National School Lunch Program

Originally authorized under the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act in 1946, the National School Lunch Program is the largest and most well-known food service program for students in the United States. Under this law, the Department of Agriculture provides funding to states to reimburse schools for expenses associated with school lunch programs and services.

Schools receive funding based on the number of meals served to students that meet income requirements for free and reduced meals. Schools with more than 40 percent eligibility for free meals are eligible to receive funding under the Community Eligibility Provision, which is reimbursed at a different rate.



National School Breakfast Program

In 1966, the School Breakfast Program began as a pilot program through the Child Nutrition Act. Like the School Lunch Program, the Breakfast Program operates based on the number of meals served to eligible students. Through regulations, the Department of Agriculture has implemented rules for school lunch and breakfast programs, including for the use of funds, meal requirements, reporting and recordkeeping, facilities management, contracts for procuring food, and other responsibilities.

Challenges to Tribal Food Services

Schools that serve Native students face unique challenges to providing high-quality, healthy food, particularly in rural and reservation areas. School leaders and community members highlight the following primary challenges to ensuring students have access to robust food programs:

Chronic Underfunding of Tribal Schools Meal Programs

Bureau-funded schools have experienced chronic underfunding for generations. This trend is not isolated to academic funding, but extends to and impacts delivery of food services to students. For decades, schools have not received adequate funding to address the full cost of purchasing and preparing healthy meals. As a result, Bureau-funded schools are forced to use core academic funding through the Indian School Equalization Program to cover funding shortfalls, cutting into funding for teachers. In addition, administrators often struggle to fund staff for meal preparation and programs due to limited funding.

Structure of Funding to Tribal Schools

Due to the current structure of the school lunch and breakfast programs, BIE schools must apply for funding through the state in which they are located. This system often fails to recognize the unique challenges of providing school lunches to students in rural and reservation areas.

Transporting Food to Rural and Remote Areas

Many Bureau-funded schools are in rural and remote areas with high costs related to transportation of food and fresh produce.



Produce trucks that provide services to several reservation schools often arrive with spoiled food, while charging each school the full roundtrip price of transportation. Many companies also refuse to drive food trucks on worn and unpaved country roads, forcing schools to meet them on the highway to pick up produce for school lunches. As a result, schools are forced to stretch critical funds to pay high transportation fees and for food that should have already been delivered.

Impact of COVID-19

Families often rely on school meal programs to provide affordable and healthy meals for their children throughout the school year. However, COVID-19 threatened the delivery of meals to many students as schools closed and food service workers were infected. States, the Bureau of Indian Education, and tribes must work with schools to ensure that all students, including Native students, continue to have access to meals that support their health and wellbeing during this public health emergency. While we worked with our partners to enact almost \$9 billion in nutrition programs for all children under the CARES Act, those funds expired at the end of FY 2021. NIEA continues to advocate to ensure this vital program continues to support all students nationwide.