



## Center for Public Policy Priorities

Twenty Years: 1985 to 2005

This week marks National School Lunch Week, a time to commemorate a program that makes it possible for every child in America to have a school lunch. It is also a time to celebrate the fact that Texas leads the nation in providing these healthy meals.

Texas doesn't always do right by its kids. Compared to the rest of the country, Texas has the highest rate of children without health insurance and a greater share of kids living in poverty than most other states. But when it comes to providing children with school lunches, Texas sets the bar.

Everyday, more than 2.8 million Texas students receive hot lunches. From September 2004-August 2005, Texas served more than 468 million lunches. Virtually every public school in Texas school participated in the program (over 7,300 schools).

The National School Lunch Program has been around since 1946, when President Harry Truman signed it into law. The impetus for the program grew out of national security concerns, after an investigation of men rejected from serving in World War II found that many were malnourished. Congress decided to combat this problem by rooting out childhood hunger, and began providing funds to states to subsidize the cost of providing school lunches.

The premise behind School Lunch today is simple: in order for children to learn, they need to eat well. To ensure that every kid can eat lunch, schools charge students for the meal based on their family's ability to pay. Schools are reimbursed the difference by the federal government, which sets the reimbursement rates and updates them for inflation each year.

Children receive a free lunch if their household income is at or below 130 percent of poverty (\$21,580 for a family of three). Children whose families earn between 130 percent and 185 percent of poverty (\$30,710 for a family of three) receive a reduced-price lunch, which can cost no more than \$.40 cents. Students who do not come from low-income families pay the full price, though the federal government subsidizes the cost of their meals as well.

Almost 60% of Texas schoolchildren are low-income and therefore eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

National School Lunch is a win-win-win, benefiting parents, students, and schools.

Parents win because they are offered a convenient way to provide lunch for their children at the lowest possible price. Meals contain one third or more of the nutrients students need everyday.

Students win because they receive the nutrition they need to learn. Research shows that proper nutrition improves a child's behavior, school performance, and overall cognitive development.

Schools win because their students do better. Not only that, but because the program is federally-funded, it costs the state nothing—in taxes or fees—to run the program.

The National School Lunch Program is a model program and a proven way to prevent childhood hunger and increase academic achievement. Texas has done an outstanding job in ensuring that its school children are eating lunch.

However, just because a child is fed doesn't mean he is well nourished. As a national leader in providing school lunch, Texas should take the lead in working to guarantee that students are provided with well-balanced, high quality lunches.

This would mean more fresh fruits and vegetables and a larger financial commitment from the state and the federal government. In this age of childhood obesity, what could be more worth it?