

Mr. Chairman, Commissioners, County Manager Outten:

This process was started when we began looking into our end of year, unpaid meal debt. All of our calculations were based on real numbers of last year's student meal sales which were approximately 2,000 per day.

During the 2023-2024 school year, of the 5,027 students in Dare County Schools, **2,121 or 42.2% of our students qualified for Free or Reduced meals**. These figures are based on the 2023-2024 Federal Income requirements for a family of four which was \$55,500 for reduced price meals. Requirements for no cost meals are over \$15,000 less. This year's reduced meal price cut off figure is \$57,720. We currently have 111 families, who have applied for Free and Reduced Meals who did not qualify based primarily on income. The majority of those families were in our Pre-K program.

Before 2019, approximately 60% of the students in North Carolina qualified for Free and Reduced Meals. Last year, 5 of our schools had a population of students greater than 50% who qualified for Free and Reduced Meals, with a sixth school at 49%. Only 3 of our schools have qualified populations below our District average of 42%. The requirements to qualify for Free and Reduced Meals are only factored on two things: the size of your household and family income. Cost of living factors such as inflation, food costs, medical bills, or rental prices are not considered.

Students can also be deemed eligible for Free and Reduced Meals as ISP students if they fall into the following categories:

- Direct Certification
 - SNAP, temporary assistance, or on Indian Reservations
- Medicaid Certification
- Homeless
- Runaway
- Migrant
- Foster
- Head Start
- Principal/School-based Administration

A child who is food insecure, who is hungry, is going to struggle to concentrate in school. They are going to struggle to learn. As one of my colleagues has said, “Proper nutrition is coupled with academic success. Feeding students is an instructional intervention, just like when we provide digital devices or school bus transportation.” Think about this. We already provide students with books, computers, and transportation, but not food.

I think sometimes when we talk about providing students with meals, we automatically envision teenagers and high school students. I want you to envision a six year old or an eight year old or an eleven year old who is hungry and does not have money to eat on a regular basis.

We are expected to do everything in our power to remove barriers to student learning, that is what we are trying to do. This isn't just about paying for our student's meals. We have an opportunity here to improve attendance, improve academic performance (because anybody who has ever worked in education knows that a hungry child can't learn), to combat student health issues and childhood obesity, improved athletic performance, remove the stigma attached to school meals, to offer a benefit to every working family in Dare County, to remove the role of collection agent from our Principals and Child Nutrition staff, and to provide nutritious meals to every student.

Of the 115 school districts in North Carolina, 106 of those districts are covering some or all of the schools in their district. 80 of those districts have schools that do not qualify, but the district went ahead and covered them anyway so those students were not left out.

1. What is the Community Eligibility Provision or CEP?

- a. CEP is a federally funded meals reimbursement program
- b. Under the CEP program, districts can serve all students no-cost breakfasts and lunches for four consecutive years.
- c. Funding for these meals is calculated based on the following formula:
 - i. $\% \text{ of ISP students} \times (\text{USDA multiplier factor of}) 1.6\% = \text{District's Eligibility Percentage}$
 1. ISP = Identified Student Percentage
 - ii. The higher the percentage of qualified students a district has, the more money they receive from the program.
- d. Currently, we have three of our schools in the CEP program:
 - i. Cape Hatteras Elementary, Cape Hatteras Secondary, and Dare Learning Academy
 1. Based on last year's figures, we have estimated that the cost for those three schools in this program to be approximately \$30,000
 - a. CHES (\$7,600), CHSS (\$22,000), DLA (\$270)
 2. Using the formula I described earlier, if we increase the number of ISP student meals provided this year:
 - a. 5% = our cost would drop to \$14,000
 - b. 11% = our cost would drop to \$1,000
- e. We have estimated that the cost to us to cover all of our schools would be approximately \$500,000 per year

2. What is Universal Meals?

- a. Universal Meals is not a program.
- b. Universal Meals means that all students will receive a complete breakfast and lunch each day at no charge
 - i. The district will receive federal reimbursement for students who qualify and eat
 1. The more qualified students who eat school meals, the more federal reimbursement dollars we receive
 - ii. The district will cover the cost of non-covered students
 1. That is why we are here today
- c. We have estimated that, based on last year's numbers, the cost to cover all schools that are not CEP would be a little over \$400,000
 - i. As I stated, if we increase the number of students who are ISP eligible and who are eating, we will increase the federally funded meals
 - ii. Which will decrease the amount of money that has to be locally funded.

3. Free, Reduced, and Paid Meals

- a. These figures show the average percentage of students district-wide in each of the categories: free, reduced, and paid who ate breakfast and lunch for the last two school years:
 - i. **2022-2023 School Year**
 1. Breakfast
 - a. 60.3% of student eligible for Free Meals
 - b. 4.9% of students eligible for Reduced Meals
 - c. 29.7% of students who paid for meals
 2. Lunch
 - a. 50.2% of student eligible for Free Meals
 - b. 4.7% of students eligible for Reduced Meals
 - c. 45.0% of students who paid for meals
 - ii. **2023-2024 School Year**
 1. Breakfast
 - a. 65.4% of student eligible for Free Meals

- b. 4.9% of students eligible for Reduced Meals
- c. 29.7% of students who paid for meals

2. Lunch

- a. 52.8% of student eligible for Free Meals
- b. 4.1% of students eligible for Reduced Meals
- c. 43.1% of students who paid for meals

4. % increased since September 17, 2024

- a. The day after our September 16th Board of Education meeting, we have served and seen an increase in:
- b. **Breakfasts** (District increased by 34.8%) (258/day)
 - i. Elementary increased by 28.7% (152/day)
 - ii. Middle increased by 32.3% (37/day)
 - iii. High increased by 69.2% (70/day)
- c. **Lunches** (District increased by 12.2%) (233/day)
 - i. Elementary increased by 5.4% (52/day)
 - ii. Middle increased by 18.9% (79/day)
 - iii. High increased by 18.9% (102/day)

5. New Free and Reduced Meal Information

- a. We are currently sending out our Free & Reduced Meal Application information and posting this information on our website for this school year.
 - i. If families were covered last year, they are covered for the start of the fall as well
 - ii. I believe in the past, folks thought filling out the application was just about school breakfast and lunch
 - iii. Did you know that if you qualify for Free and Reduced Meals, you also qualify for:
 - 1. Amazon Prime Access
 - 2. Discounted internet access
 - 3. AT&T Lifeline (discounted wireless phone service)
 - 4. AP Test reduced fees
 - 5. College Exam Fee Waivers
 - 6. Sun Bucks (Summer EBT program)
 - 7. Food for Thought Resources

8. Increased school funding and
 9. Free or reduced breakfasts and lunches at school
- b. We are hoping that our families will take a new look at what they can get through this program and take full advantage of it
 - c. You can find out more information by going to our Dare County School's website, scroll down the main page just under the big opening picture, and click on the "Free & Reduced Meals "Apple"
6. Based on our estimates, by funding this request, you will save the families of Dare County Schools somewhere between \$700 and \$1,200 per year.
 7. At our recent 5-on-5 meeting between your Board and the Dare County Board of Education, you requested that the Board of Education decide exactly what our Board wanted to request from the Commissioners. At our recent Special Called Board of Education Meeting, our Board voted 6-1 to request additional funding for the Universal Meals plan to cover no-cost meals for our students.