

Demand Is Increasing For Subsidized Meals

Rise Comes Amid Economic Downturn

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The country's economic downturn can be measured in the breakfast line at McNair Elementary School, where students collect a Styrofoam tray with a banana, cereal and juice box before joining classmates for reading. More than 200 children arrive unfed at the Herndon school each morning, about double the total in September.

In many communities, growing numbers of students rely on schools for two meals a day. In Fairfax County, home to the Washington region's largest school system, the portion of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals rose from 21 to 23 percent. In Prince William County, the number rose from 30 to 33 percent and in Montgomery County, from 26 to 28 percent. In foreclosure-wracked Clark County, Nev., where Las Vegas is located, the rate has climbed to 46 percent, from 38 percent 1 1/2 years ago.

The jolt in demand for government-subsidized meals comes as many school programs are struggling to balance their food service budgets because of higher costs and a decline in paying customers, school nutrition advocates said. They are asking Congress to expand the \$12 billion-a-year lunch and breakfast program when it is up for reauthorization this fall.

Most school systems lose money with every free and reduced-price meal, said Katie Wilson, president of the School Nutrition Association. "There is a crisis brewing here," she said.

The typical school lunch costs \$2.92 to prepare, the association said. The federal government reimburses school systems \$2.57 for each free lunch, \$2.17 for every reduced-price lunch and 24 cents for each full-price lunch. Schools also receive 20 cents a lunch to spend on government-issued food.

Local school systems said the federal reimbursements don't cover production expenses. Fairfax nutrition officials said it costs about \$3.76 to make a lunch. Fairfax schools, like others, have invested in healthier but higher-cost foods, such as whole grains and fresh fruit. Labor expenses are also significant.

Virginia, Maryland and some other states supplement the federal contribution. But many school systems seek catering work and sales from vending machines or a la carte desserts or side dishes to balance their budgets.

Prices for full-paying students also have increased in recent years. But many school systems said they have lost money on them, too. Prince George's County raised lunch fees this school year to \$2 in elementary school (from \$1.75) and \$2.25 in middle and high schools (from \$1.85), but county schools lose money on those sales.

Despite prices that can beat McDonald's or a home-packed lunch, many school nutrition officials said their full-price food sales are down this year.

The nutrition association estimates that half of all school systems nationwide have more students who are struggling to pay for meals. Some schools allow children without money to charge meals; others provide a bowl of cereal or sandwich. Albuquerque public schools amassed more than \$100,000 in unpaid lunch charges during the first part of this academic year and began offering free cheese sandwiches rather than absorbing more debt for hot lunches.

In many places, the children most likely to be short of cash are those who pay the reduced prices.

To qualify for free meals, a family of four, for example, can make at most \$27,560. Partial subsidies go to such families making up to \$39,220. Students in the reduced-price category pay 30 cents for breakfast or 40 cents for lunch.

Advocates say the seemingly small fee can be insurmountable for some, and they are lobbying Congress to eliminate it. "These are families that are on the very cusp," Wilson said. "They are making decisions like do they put gas in their car to go to work, or do they pay their electricity. These families do not have the 40 cents to pay for lunch."

Prince William officials said that although 90 to 95 percent of students eligible for free lunches eat every day, 85 percent or fewer of those who qualify for the reduced price eat a school lunch. Nationwide, the Agriculture Department, which administers the school meals program, estimates that 1 million students are eligible for a reduced-price lunch but don't take advantage of it.

To boost participation, Alexandria opted to pay the additional 70 cents a day for children in reduced-price breakfast and lunch programs. Gaithersburg schools pay the extra fee for breakfast through a business partnership. Washington state pays for breakfast for such children.

At McNair Elementary, Principal Theresa West said eliminating the small fee would help many of her parents, who work hourly wage jobs for landscape services or hotels. Every day, she said, a teacher or cafeteria worker volunteers a dollar or two to help students who come through the lunch line without money.

They are determined to make sure no child is hungry during school. And they are increasingly concerned about the students' well-being after school and over the summer. A nearby church has begun donating bags of canned food and granola bars for students to take home over the weekend.

"There are so many things [students] worry about," West said. "You don't want them to have to worry about food."