

North Carolina Summer Meals Waiver Case Study

As part of a joint effort to increase access to summer meals in the state, No Kid Hungry North Carolina, the Department of Public Instruction and the Department of Health and Human Services requested a waiver from USDA to simplify the application and reporting process for school districts to participate in the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) for providing free summer meals to kids. USDA approved the waiver; thus, the qualified districts were able to use the waiver to more easily access SFSP which provides a higher level of reimbursement per meal and helped schools cover the cost of summer meal programs.

Implementation of the waiver in 11 North Carolina school districts in summer 2012 came with additional support from Share Our Strength and No Kid Hungry North Carolina, such as small grants, application support, site recruitment, community outreach and enrichment activities at sites. In July the school districts using the waiver collectively doubled their lunches and the number of children served compared to 2011 levels. While school nutrition staff reported that the administration of the program was a greater burden than anticipated, most also found the reimbursement increase to be worth the effort.

In November 2012, USDA distributed a memo extending the waiver to national regulations in 2013.

ABOUT SUMMER MEALS PROGRAMS

Summer is a critical time for children's academic and physical well-being. During the summer, children are at a higher risk of both obesity and hunger. To address the gap in regular school meals the USDA administers a number of summer nutrition programs throughout the country. Nationally these programs serve about three million children each summer. In 2011 the programs reached 2.8 million children nationally, almost 15 percent of the more than 19 million children that eat a free or reduced-price meal during the school year¹.

There are two programs that contribute to the summer nutrition program. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP), used in conjunction with the School Breakfast Program (SBP), takes traditional school lunch into summer school, providing meals to students at free, reduced and paid rates exactly the same as during the regular school year. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides reimbursements to local government, camps, schools, and private nonprofit organizations to provide meals to children during the summer months. In designated low-income areas, open sites provide free meals to all children who attend the site. Within the National School Lunch Program there is an option for schools to serve free meals to children in low-income areas similar to SFSP known as the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) which uses NSLP and SBP meal patterns and reimbursement system to provide community food service.

BACKGROUND: NORTH CAROLINA SUMMER MEALS

In North Carolina the summer programs are administered by two state agencies. The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) administers the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO). The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) manages the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). For the summers between 2006 and 2011 the three programs experienced some fluctuations in children served, but together had reached between 72,441² children (2006) and 81,267³ children (2008) consistently. In 2011 the programs served a combined 78,413⁴ children of the 611,453 that ate a free or reduced-price lunch during the 2010-2011 school year, or about 13 percent.

No Kid Hungry North Carolina launched in the fall of 2011 as a collaboration between Governor Bev Perdue and Share Our Strength and focused on ending childhood hunger in the state by better connecting children to federal nutrition programs. Immediately, the leaders of No Kid Hungry North Carolina started meeting with leaders from DPI and DHHS to determine a strategy to reach more children through the summer meals programs.

¹ [Hunger Doesn't Take A Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report 2012](#); FRAC

² [Hunger Doesn't Take A Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report 2007](#); FRAC

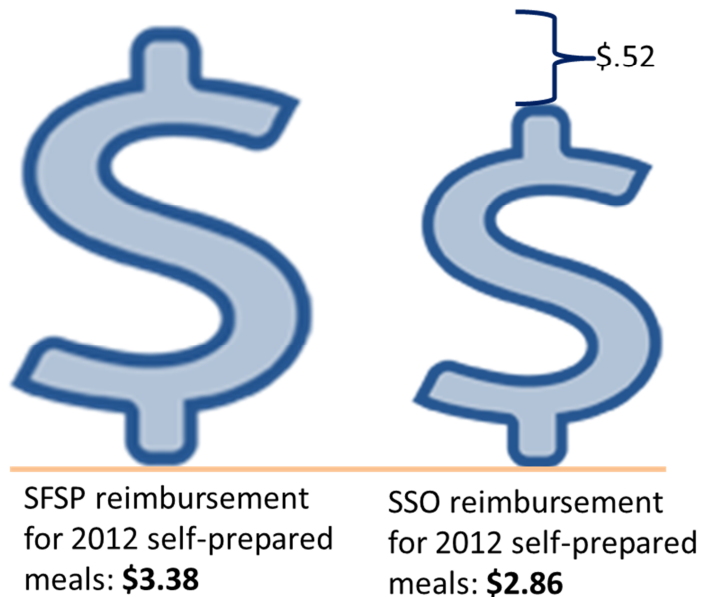
³ [Hunger Doesn't Take A Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report 2009](#); FRAC

⁴ [Hunger Doesn't Take A Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report 2012](#); FRAC

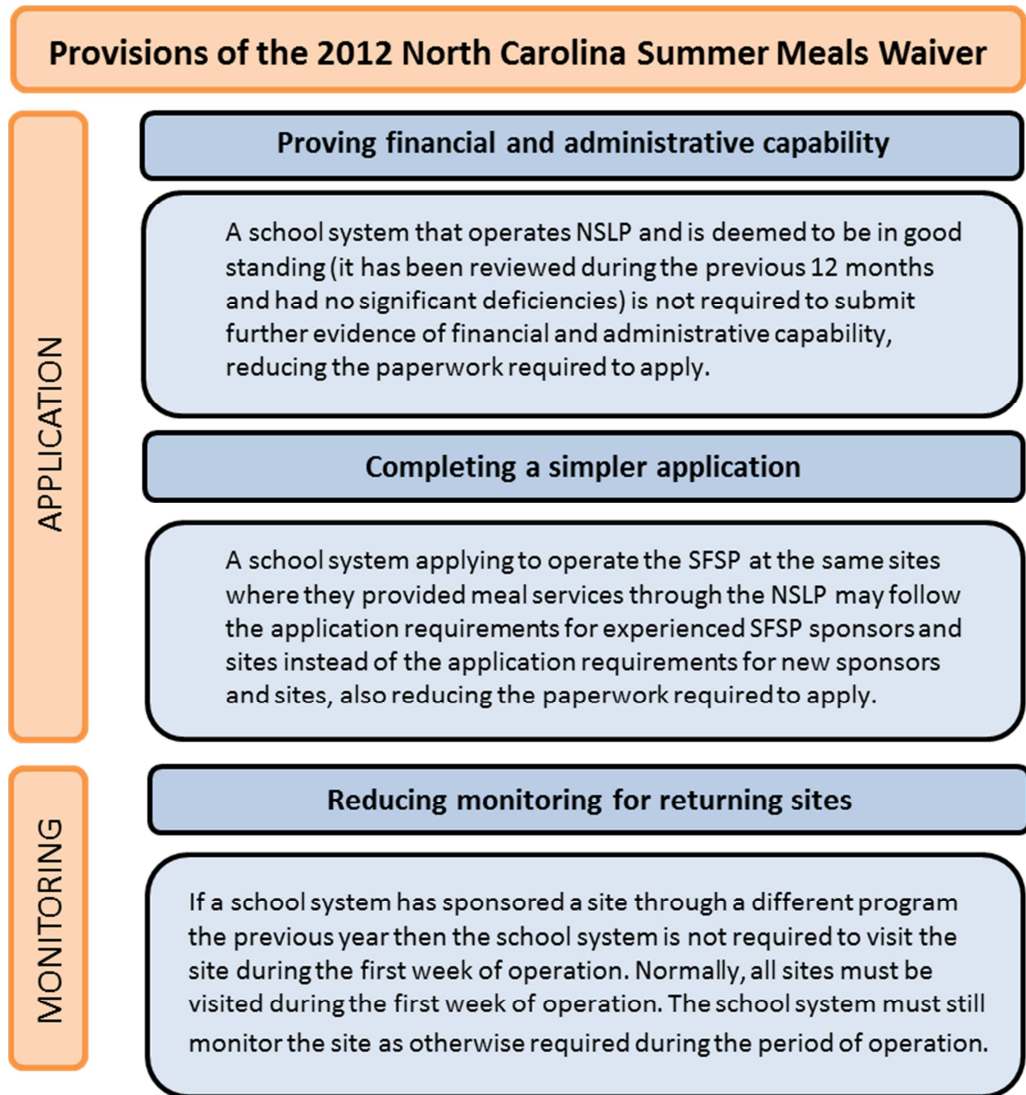
DEVELOPING THE WAIVER

A major challenge facing summer meals programs in North Carolina was the choice by schools not to serve meals during the summer. Much like other states, tightened budgets made it hard for schools to provide programming, staff salaries and building security and pay utilities needed to keep their facilities open and serve meals to children. The Seamless Summer Option made it administratively easy for schools to provide meals to low-income children during the summer months, but not always financially viable. SFSP offers a higher reimbursement rate, but requires a separate application and monitoring process, which increases the administrative burden on schools. Thus, helping schools access the SFSP higher reimbursement rate without adding administrative burden would make it possible for more schools to stay open and provide meals to low-income children during the summer.

Summer Lunch Reimbursement Comparison



The North Carolina team shared this idea with a regional USDA representative who recommended that they submit a waiver application for summer 2012 citing the Paperwork Reduction Act. The waiver would allow schools that operate National School Lunch Program and/or the School Breakfast Program in “good standing” to complete the “experienced sponsor” application for SFSP—greatly decreasing the length and burden of the application. It also asked for reduced monitoring of returning sites that had previously served summer meals through SSO, but were new to SFSP.



As part of the proposal, the team identified more than a dozen low-income counties with previously limited participation in summer meals programs but that had a large number of kids likely to be in need of free meals during summer months. The team held a webinar for school nutrition staff to explain their idea and ultimately submitted 11 school districts to USDA as participants in the potential waiver.

The waiver received USDA approval in late March 2012 for implementation that summer.

IMPLEMENTING THE WAIVER

Once the waiver was approved, No Kid Hungry North Carolina and the state agencies began their work to implement the pilot in the 11 selected school districts. The process, while simplified, still required the districts to submit applications to be approved to operate SFSP. No Kid Hungry North Carolina provided small grants (up to \$1800) to cover capacity building costs, assisted with application support and deployed two outreach staff to help identify organizations to serve as meal sites.

Once the applications and sites were in place, No Kid Hungry North Carolina and DHHS partnered to produce and distribute oversized postcards advertising summer meal programs in the area. When possible, the postcards were distributed through schools that were still in session. The postcards, as well as other promotional events and materials, featured a number and shortcode that kids or parents could text to receive information about the nearest meal site to their location. In addition to these and other efforts to increase awareness about summer meals, No Kid Hungry North Carolina partnered with the nonprofit organization [KickingForHunger](#) to provide activities at some sites during the summer to help increase participation. KickingForHunger provides a free soccer skills camp in conjunction with collecting food for local distribution to raise awareness about hunger and build community.

SUMMER MEALS PARTICIPATION RESULTS

The waiver was intended to incentivize school systems to start or increase their summer meal service by making it simpler to receive a higher reimbursement. The North Carolina team focused on implementing the waiver in districts that had low levels of participation in 2011 and thus represented great opportunity for increases in 2012. At the end of the summer, the waiver school districts had dramatic results. In July the 11 school districts served more than 4,400 children – an increase of more than 2,200 children and 100 percent growth above 2011 levels⁵. The number of sites in the districts also increased greatly. Within the pilot districts the number of sites increased from 112 in July 2011 to 187 in July 2012 – a 67 percent increase.

No Kid Hungry North Carolina partnered with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Government to conduct a formal evaluation of the many efforts to increase participation in summer meals programs, including the waiver pilot. From their interviews the researchers found that school nutrition staff still reported having a great deal of paperwork to complete, but overall, the reimbursement increase outweighed the administrative burden. Thus, the waiver successfully helped increase access to summer meals in North Carolina.

⁵ Participation levels for July 2011 and 2012 were calculated for each site by dividing the number of lunches served during the month by the number of actual service days. Each site sponsored by the 11 school districts was then added together to give the 2011 baseline and 2012 result.

NEXT STEPS

In November 2012 the USDA distributed a memo that extended most of the North Carolina waiver elements nationally, making the updated application and reporting process for schools that meet the criteria and want to use SFSP to serve summer meals possible throughout the country.

The team from No Kid Hungry North Carolina, DHHS and DPI will also continue to look for ways to make it easier for schools to serve summer meals through SFSP and serve the most children possible.

Prior to the USDA communication in November, the North Carolina team had already started to recruit new school districts with high levels of low-income students and low levels of summer meal service to use the waiver rules to serve through SFSP for next summer. The team attended the fall 2012 Annual Conference for Child Nutrition Administrators where they recognized the waiver school districts for their success over the summer and also hosted with the state agencies a festive reception and information session. Representatives from more than 40 school districts attended the reception to learn more about serving summer meals through SFSP. The No Kid Hungry North Carolina team has continued collaborating with DHHS and DPI to lay the groundwork for summer 2013. They will hold sessions exclusively for targeted school districts' child nutrition staff to train them on summer meals programs during the upcoming NC Child Hunger Leaders statewide conference on February 20, 2013.