

CHILD HUNGER DOESN'T END WITH THE SCHOOL YEAR

by Carlyn Williams

School is in session and over 60,000 Maine children avoid hunger with free or reduced-price school lunch programs. During the summer months, these kids are not so lucky. Despite the availability of federal resources to pay for summer food programs, less than one in ten eligible students have access to free meals during the summer months. Given the recession's indiscriminate impact on Maine children and families, it is imperative that policymakers, schools, and local communities take full advantage of federal resources to ensure that no child goes hungry in summer 2012. This brief highlights some of the challenges and opportunities for achieving this goal.

83,676 Maine Children Are Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch¹

During the 2010-2011 school year, 44% of Maine students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals through the National School Lunch Program. This represented a 13% increase from the 2008-2009 school year, reflecting the growing number of children living in low-income families. Children in participating schools can receive free meals if their family income is at or below 130% of the federal poverty threshold (\$22,314 for a family of four in 2010). Children from families with income between 130% and 185% of poverty are eligible for reduced-price meals.

Child eligibility for subsidized meals ranges from 31% to 62% across Maine counties, demonstrating the prevalence of childhood hunger.² In half of Maine public schools 50% or more of the students qualify for meal subsidies. One in seven schools have 70% or higher eligibility rates, including a few reaching 100%. These children do not disappear during the summer but remain hungry and unsure of their next meal.

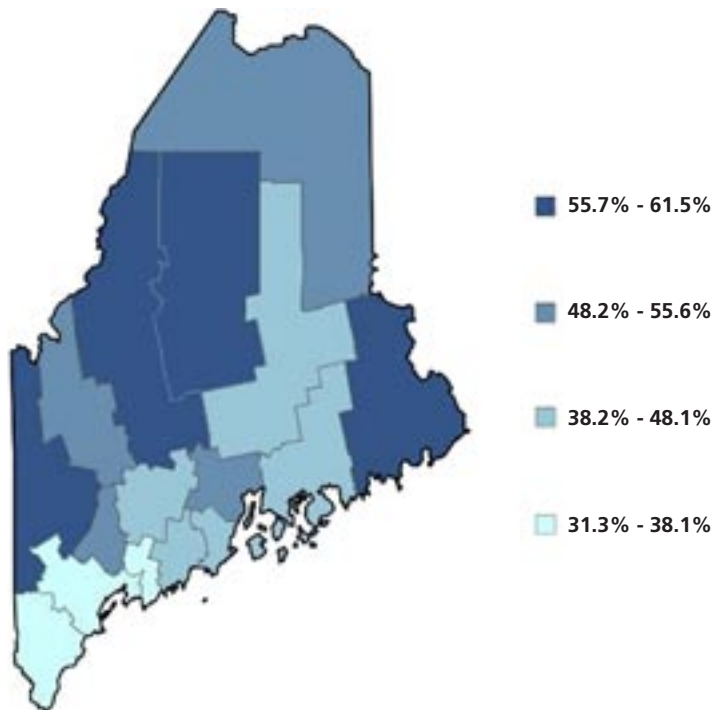


It is imperative that policymakers, schools, and local communities take full advantage of federal resources to ensure that no child goes hungry in summer 2012.

While the long-term solution centers on improving financial stability for low-income families, the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) can feed these children now. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reimburses states for meals served at summer food sites registered with

and Sagadahoc – meet less than 5% of need. In 2011, Maine’s SFSP food sites served a daily average of 7,777 lunches. In contrast, during the school year there is a much higher daily average of 69,538 free or reduced-price lunches.⁴ Since USDA does not cap its reimbursement to

for the whole summer break, the amount of USDA reimbursement could increase to a total of as much as \$11.11 million.⁶ Given these estimates, Maine is utilizing only 10% of potential federal funding, leaving the vast majority of low-income children struggling with hunger during their “summer vacation.”



School Children Receiving Subsidized School Lunch 2010 – 2011

Maine Children’s Alliance
KIDS COUNT Data Center, www.kidscount.org/datacenter
A Project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation

SFSP. Food sites in a district with 50% or higher eligibility rate can be “open” and serve any child a free meal. In districts of less than 50% eligibility, the food site is “enrolled” and only children who apply and qualify can receive free meals.

Maine Utilizes 10% of Potential Federal Funding for SFSP

Maine currently serves only 10% of these students in the summer through SFSP.³ Site distribution is uneven across the State. Two counties – Hancock and Lincoln – have no sites; three counties – Knox, Piscataquis

states, meaning Maine can potentially feed every eligible child through SFSP, this discrepancy demonstrates both the degree of unmet need and a severe under-utilization of available resources.

In 2011, USDA reimbursed Maine SFSP sponsors \$1.11 million.⁵ If Maine increased its SFSP participation rate to match its school year rate of children receiving subsidized meals, it could receive as much as \$6.84 million in additional funding for an average of 34 SFSP operating days. If Maine extended SFSP to 5 days a week and 50 days

Lack of Transportation and Outreach Create Major Barriers

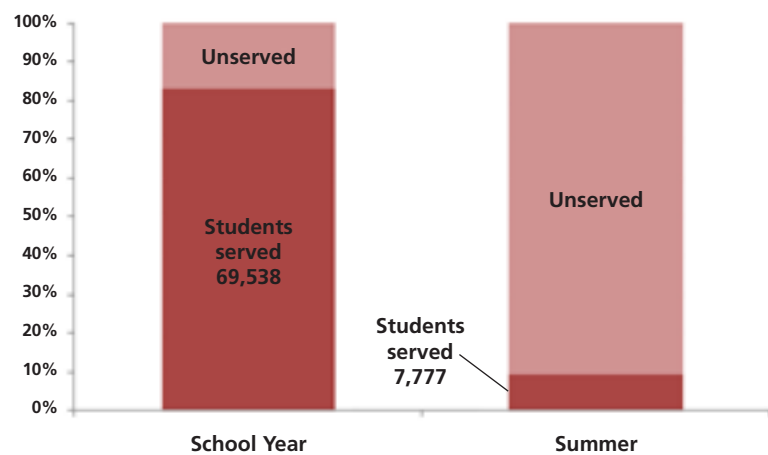
Maine must overcome three key barriers to increase the SFSP participation rate: insufficient staffing, outreach and transportation. Recruiting SFSP sponsors and coordinating statewide SFSP sites requires more than a part-time or seasonal effort. Last spring, the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) increased the number of sites and sponsors by hiring a short-term contractor. Considering the existing participation rate gap, MDOE must commit consistent, year-round staffing to continue SFSP expansion, especially in school districts with the most urgent needs.

The next step is to publicize established SFSP sites. The 2010 federal Hunger-Free Kids Act requires schools to distribute SFSP information to parents. Unfortunately, this act lacks specificity and is so new that outreach continues to lag in Maine. But there are plenty of proven best practices in other states that Maine can implement, such as sending flyers home in children’s backpacks and publicizing programs in various organization newsletters or even utility bills.

Maine’s sparse, rural geography also inhibits food site access for children without transportation. To overcome the outreach and transportation barriers, many sponsors depend on summer day camps or local recreational programs

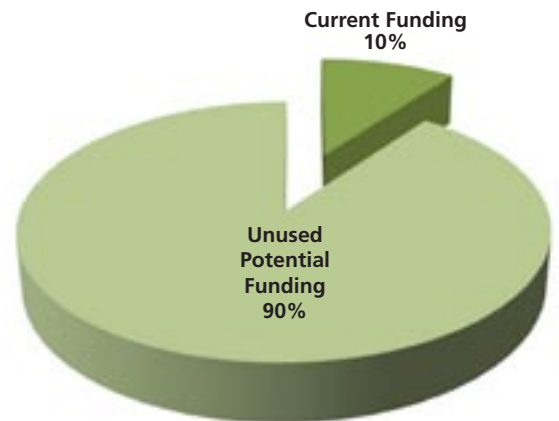
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Few Eligible Children Receive Subsidized Lunch in the Summer (Daily Average 2011)



Source: MECEP Analysis of MDOE Data

Maine only Utilizes 10% of Available Federal Funding for Summer Food Program



for enrollment. Camps can provide food and childcare in one place, but they generally do not last the entire summer and can be costly. While not a long-term and widely applicable solution, increasing camp participation would help increase SFSP participation in the short run.

School Responsibility and Community Involvement Are Crucial

Cumberland and Aroostook Counties reach a higher proportion of children through school initiative and community commitment. About 53% of Aroostook County students are eligible for subsidized school lunch, the seventh highest rate in Maine.⁷ Of the 5,483 students receiving subsidized school lunches, nearly half (45%) participate in SFSP.⁸ This is the highest participation rate in Maine, despite the fact that Aroostook is the State's most sparsely populated county. The fact that school superintendents in Aroostook accept responsibility to feed children during the summer makes all the difference. As a result, school districts sponsor 97% of Aroostook's SFSP sites.⁹ As this sense of responsibility grows in other counties, there is hope that more

school districts will take the initiative to sponsor SFSP sites. As a school nutrition staffer commented when opening a new food site in York County, SFSP "is just an extension of what we already do."

Following a different approach, Cumberland County has the fourth highest SFSP participation rate (34%) in Maine and serves the largest number of children (4,298). Community involvement and community based organizations are the keys. Camps or private nonprofit organizations sponsor 80% of Cumberland County's food sites.¹⁰ For example, Portland-based Preble Street works directly with municipal recreation departments, school dining services and local food pantries to coordinate and facilitate food site planning. Preble Street has helped establish open sites at town beaches, schools, playgrounds, and within affordable housing complexes.

Selecting sites and sponsors is not a uniform or simple process. With support and guidance from MDOE, each county can and should develop strategies that capitalize on community resources and meet children's needs.

What Maine Can Do to Effectively Increase Summer Food Service

States can use SFSP as an effective tool to prevent summer childhood hunger. Although Maine and Vermont have similar food insecurity levels, Maine ranks 23rd for SFSP participation while Vermont ranks 11th.¹¹ Hunger Free Vermont, a nonprofit organization, is credited for providing the spark by working with the Vermont Department of Education to increase SFSP participation through public and private programs. Now a coalition of nonprofit groups including MECEP, Preble Street, Maine Equal Justice Partners, Maine AARP, Maine Council of Churches, and Muskie School of Public Service, are also working together to promote higher SFSP participation rates as the Maine Hunger Initiative.

In 2011, the Initiative and its supporters promoted LD 860 to require that schools establish summer food sites if 40% or more students in a district are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. The effort fell short. The final bill signed into law (MRS Title 20-A §6602) does not require any school districts

to provide summer food sites, but rather suggests that districts with certain levels of eligibility create sites on a graduated timeline. It recommends that the 51 Maine school districts with one or more schools with at least a 75% eligibility rate establish sites in the summer following the 2011-2012 school year. Districts with schools of at least 65% eligibility rate may provide sites in 2013, and districts with schools of at least 50% eligibility rate may establish sites in 2014.¹² In its final form, this law highlights the issue but lacks any mechanism for actually increasing the number of sites during these tough economic times.

Improving programs and involving schools and communities to end childhood hunger should remain a priority of the Administration and Legislature. Implementing the following steps can help increase SFSP participation:

- Fund a position within MDOE dedicated to expanding SFSP.
- Work with current sponsors to increase food sites. If each sponsor adds one site, the total number of sites can jump from 224 to 302.¹³

- Target outreach to underrepresented school districts as called for in LD 860 and pursue strategies that support both school and community based approaches. One recommendation is to create a Summer Food Advisory Council to work with MDOE to raise awareness, promote best practices, and highlight program innovations.
- Increase outreach efforts in areas with SFSP sites. Expand information distribution and enhance publicity by engaging local media, businesses and communities.
- Explore options, such as leveraging existing community transportation services, to help children access SFSP sites in rural areas.

Taking full advantage of available federal resources is crucial to addressing childhood hunger. Improving the economic security of Maine families in the long run requires policymakers to take bold steps to support quality jobs, enhance income supports for low-income working families, and maintain basic public services. Ensuring children in Maine grow up healthy and strong is not only our collective responsibility, it is also essential to the future prosperity of all Maine families.

About the Author

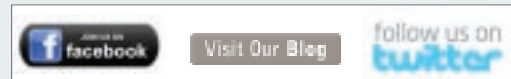


Carlyn Williams from Damariscotta Mills, Maine studied International Relations at the University of Rochester and conducted study on Maine's summer food programs on behalf of MECEP last summer.

Endnotes

- 1 Maine Children's Alliance Maine Kids Count report 2011.
- 2,3,4,7,8,9,10,13 MDOE Child Nutrition Information. <http://maine.gov/education/sfs/>.
- 11 www.frac.org, 2010.
- 5 The sum of Claim amounts from all sites on MDOE's "Monthly Reimbursement Report" for 2011.
- 6 69,538-7,777=61,761 meals per day discrepancy; 61761x\$3.2375 (2011 reimbursement rate per meal) = \$199,951 Maine could receive in addition per day.
- 12 <http://www.mainelegislature.org/> Maine Children's Alliance Maine Kids Count report 2011 edition.

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