

## School breakfast for all: What Alabama can do to help feed all of our kids

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### Overview

Alabama can and should do more to equip our children and our schools for success. One big step would be to provide school breakfast for all our children. And our lawmakers can make major progress toward that goal this year with a modest allocation from the Education Trust Fund (ETF) budget.

Alabama Arise is recommending an ETF appropriation of **\$16 million** to support public schools, including public charter schools, that wish to provide breakfast to all their students.

From this amount, each of the 1,459 Alabama schools participating in the National School Lunch Program would be eligible to receive a \$5,000 base grant to upgrade their food service capacities.

The remaining \$8.7 million could be distributed to eligible schools to bring their breakfast service reimbursements to the maximum possible federal level.

### The benefits of school breakfast

Children who start the day with breakfast learn better, participate more in class and are less likely to skip school than are kids who don't get breakfast. But tight family budgets, busy mornings and before-daylight bus routes can mean many children arrive at school hungry. School districts across the country have found that breakfast for all children, served after the first bell, reduces hunger and helps kids learn.

It's time for Alabama's school districts to join their peers nationwide in feeding breakfast to all of our kids. Here are just a few of the benefits:

**School breakfast reduces child hunger across our state.** In Alabama, 23% of school-age children are food insecure, meaning they do not always have enough to eat or know when they will get their next meal. That rate is even higher among children of color. School breakfast could guarantee a morning meal for all Alabama children during the school day. School breakfast for all kids also allows schools to experiment with food delivery services like grab-and-go kiosks or breakfast in the classroom that

increase participation and make sure kids are ready to start the day.

**School breakfast reduces chronic absenteeism.** Nearly 1 in 5 Alabama children have been chronically absent from school, and 53% of Alabama schools have high absenteeism rates. Research has shown that students who get breakfast at school have improved attendance and decreased tardiness, according to the Food Research and Action Center.

**School breakfast improves standardized testing and math scores.** Alabama ranks 48th in average math ACT scores. Academic achievement improves, especially for math, when breakfast is available for school-age children.

**School breakfast reduces behavioral problems.** Child hunger contributes to impulsivity, hyperactivity, irritability, aggression, anxiety and substance abuse, according to the National Institutes of Health. Reducing hunger would reduce these behaviors.

## How Alabama lawmakers can help feed children

**The Alabama Legislature can help schools offer school breakfast for all children.** The Legislature can help feed Alabama's schoolchildren by appropriating ETF dollars to match federal funds for school breakfast. Schools that choose to offer breakfast to all their children can use these matching funds to give all their students breakfast at the start of the school day. Thirty-five other states are considering similar legislation, and eight states have approved some form of school meals for every child.

**How is school breakfast funded now?** Many schools already provide breakfast for all children, but other schools need state help. Some Alabama schools offer breakfast to income-eligible children under the traditional federal School Breakfast Program, administered by the Alabama State Department of Education.

Schools with a significant number of low-income children can receive the maximum federal reimbursement for all meals served. But some Alabama schools can't make the federal reimbursement rate work for them without additional state or local dollars. And some Alabama schools would like to offer breakfast for all their children but don't want to deal with federal regulations that might impact their Title 1 distribution to local schools.

## Bottom line

Providing school breakfast at all public schools would be an important step to improve child nutrition and student success. An ETF budget appropriation of approximately \$16 million would allow Alabama schools to be made whole if they can't receive the maximum federal reimbursement for these meals. This support for school breakfast for all would help children grow, thrive and learn across Alabama.