

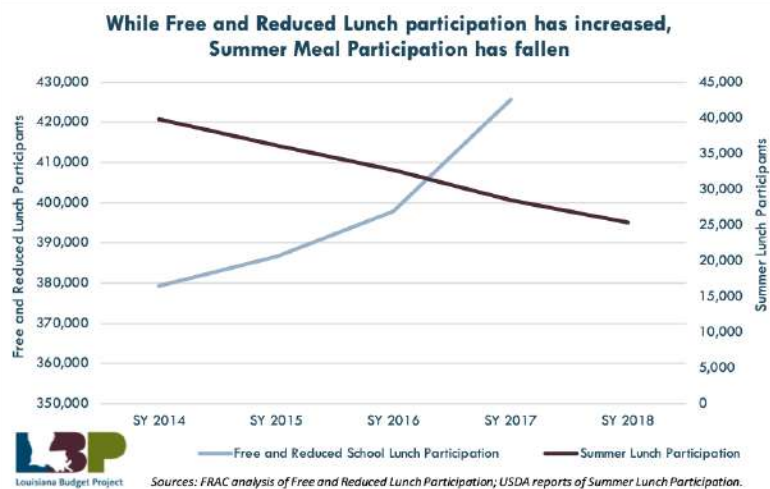
## Louisiana Should Do More to Feed Hungry Children this Summer

School is almost out, and for many of Louisiana’s children the end of school—and the end of school lunch—also means the beginning of summer hunger. Nearly 1 in 4 children in Louisiana live in a family that struggles to keep food on the table while meeting their other basic needs. This makes Louisiana 48<sup>th</sup> in the nation for child food security.<sup>1</sup> For those kids, meals provided at school through the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs are a vital source of good, nutritious food. And thankfully, Louisiana has seen great success in promoting free- and reduced-price lunch. Participation in that program consistently increased between 2014 and 2017, due in large part to the state’s [success in promoting the Community Eligibility Provision of the Healthy and Hunger Free Kids Act](#).<sup>2</sup>

When school is out, however, our state has more work to do to make sure Louisiana’s children have good food to eat regardless of the resources available to them at home. The Federal Summer Food Service Program (SFSP, or summer meals) provides free meals to children in need when school is out of session. But over the same period that Louisiana saw a 12 percent increase in enrollment in free- and reduced-price lunch, participation in the Summer Food Service Program declined by 29 percent between 2014 and 2017.

**In 2014, nearly 40,000 Louisiana children from low-income families received free lunches in the summer, funded by the Summer Meals Program. Last summer, barely 25,000 children had that same resource.**

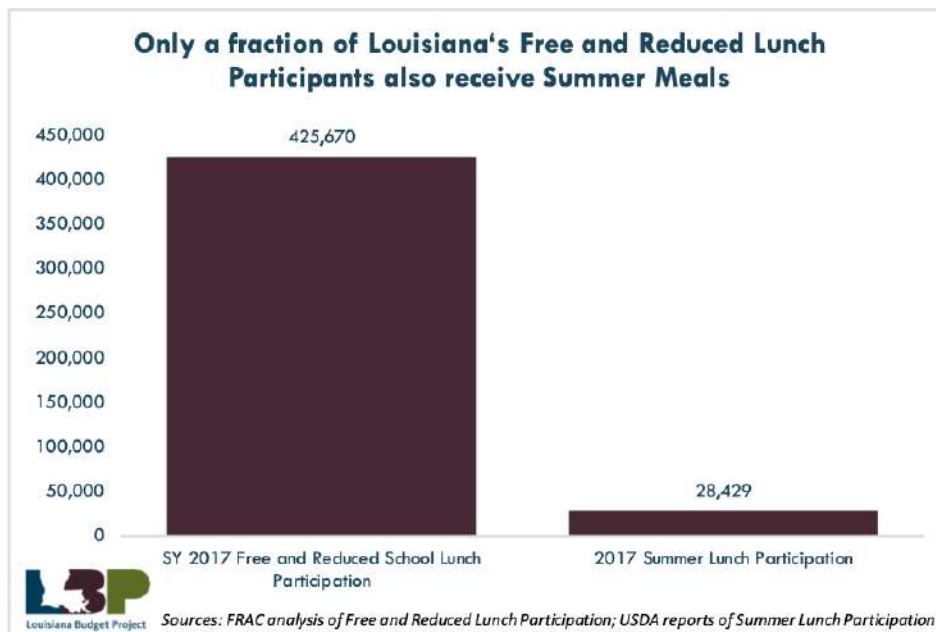
The Food Research and Action Center recently ranked Louisiana 49th among the 50 states and Washington D.C. for the ratio of children participating in the Summer Food Service Program to children receiving free or reduced lunch. In absolute terms, summer meals reach far fewer children than are served by school lunch.



<sup>1</sup> “Map the Meal Gap: Child Food Insecurity” (Feeding America, 2018), 2, <https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/research/map-the-meal-gap/2016/2016-map-the-meal-gap-child-food-insecurity.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Through community eligibility, schools and districts with a high proportion of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, as identified by their receipt of SNAP or FITAP benefits or their status as homeless youth or children in foster care, can provide lunch to the entire student body without collecting applications for individual students. This significantly streamlines program administration, and allows schools to reach a greater proportion of eligible students than is generally achieved through direct certification and the collection of individual free and reduced lunch applications alone.

While some factors necessarily limit the reach of summer meals in comparison with school lunch—the fact that children are not generally gathered together in school outside of the school year is chief among them—Louisiana can and should do more to promote this program and to extend its reach.



A 2006 survey of summer feeding sponsors found that the amount of paperwork involved in the program was the most significant reasons sponsors reported both for leaving the program and for not wanting to start another program in the future.<sup>3</sup> More recently, a study by the Government Accountability Office found that paperwork

requirements for participating in the program are often very challenging for sponsors and sites. One sponsor, who administers both the Child and Adult Care Feeding Program and the summer food program, reported spending 42 hours completing duplicative paperwork.<sup>4</sup>

Simplifications to the program at the federal level would help to remove barriers to feeding hungry kids in the summer. But there also is more that the state can do to improve the program and to reverse the decline that in recent years have taken nutritious meals away from children in need.

In October, 2018, for procedural reasons, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) rescinded six nationwide waivers that simplified administration of the program and had been in place since 2011. But states can reapply for waivers that would increase the efficiency of their own programs. The vast majority of states have already done so. Recently, the Louisiana Department of Education, which administers the summer meals program in our state, applied for and received one of the six rescinded waivers, which allows summer feeding sites to exercise an option to reduce food waste and promotes vegetable consumption. The state also worked with USDA to establish an innovative system that makes

<sup>3</sup> Elaine Fontenot Molaison and Deborah H Carr, "Summer Food Service Program Sponsors' Perceived Benefits and Barriers Related to Participation in the Program," *The Journal of Child Nutrition and Management* 30, no. 2 (2006), [https://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/5\\_News\\_and\\_Publications/4\\_The\\_Journal\\_of\\_Child\\_Nutrition\\_and\\_Management/Fall\\_2006/10-molaison.pdf](https://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/5_News_and_Publications/4_The_Journal_of_Child_Nutrition_and_Management/Fall_2006/10-molaison.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> "Summer Meals: Actions Needed to Improve Participation Estimates and Address Program Challenges" (U. S. Government Accountability Office, July 2, 2018), 42–43, <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-369>.

it easier for day-camp style summer feeding sites to provide summer meals if they are in an area served by a school participating in the Community Eligibility Program for school lunch—a solution that largely replaces one of the rescinded waivers. These efforts should be applauded.

**Time is running out for statewide waivers this year, but the Department of Education should work with USDA to apply for the remaining five waivers, for this year if possible, and for future program years as well.** Louisiana should take advantage of every opportunity to make sure that summer meals are as accessible and easy to administer as possible. While individual sites and sponsors can currently apply to USDA for waivers, the application process is oriented toward state agencies, and can be complicated and confusing for a local church or non-profit. With a statewide waivers in effect, the Department of Education could create a more accessible application process. Texas, for example, [allows sites to apply for waiver flexibility by using a simple checkbox](#) on their application, and only requests additional data from sites and sponsors as necessary to meet federal reporting requirements.

Three of the remaining waivers would make it easier for sponsors to administer summer meals sites by allowing them to spend more time with new and struggling sites in the first week of the program, rather than having to visit every site in that first week, often across a significant geographic area. The fourth would allow sites to serve more meals and snacks than current regulations allow by aligning meal and snack service times with their program schedules, even if those meals are served fewer than three hours apart. For families facing severe food need, an extra meal a day for a child makes a very big difference.

Beyond the waivers, the Department of Education can play an important leadership role in expanding the program by building on its existing partnerships so that more kids can have enough food to eat when school's out of session. The governor's office also has an important role to play in ensuring that Louisiana reaffirms its commitment to feeding hungry kids in the summer. The [Food Research and Action Center outlines best practices](#) the governor can use to expand the reach of this federally funded program in Louisiana.

Summer hunger is a reality for too many of Louisiana's children. The summer feeding program is a powerful tool to fight it. The Department of Education and Gov. John Bel Edwards should lead the way in making the summer feeding program more accessible, expansive, and effective.

—Danny Mintz