

MSNA Public Policy/Legislative Committee Absorbs Member Feedback

The impact of Minnesota's free school lunch and breakfast program is being felt across the state. School nutrition personnel have been planning, preparing and will serve tens of millions of meals, free of charge to students and families, this school year. The recent November Budget Forecast for the state of Minnesota shows an increase in anticipated expenditures for the free meals program as participation, especially in breakfast, has been higher than originally anticipated. With the 2024 legislative session fast approaching on February 12, the MSNA Public Policy/Legislative (PPL) committee is absorbing this information, reviewing member feedback from a recent survey, and preparing for potential legislative initiatives that could further impact school nutrition programs.



What are MSNA members saying? Ensuring a quality meal experience for all students is top of mind and finding more time in the daily school schedule is needed to make sure staff have time to serve and students have time to eat. We're hearing from many of you that lunch time is compressed, and staff shortages are making it difficult to get everyone through in a timely manner. The pressure to continue collecting free and reduced price applications continues to burn clock hours. Until a better method of generating Compensatory and Title funding is created, school nutrition staff will be team players in helping schools generate these critical funding streams through collection of 'educational benefits' forms. In exchange, we need school leaders to adjust school schedules to allow for more time at lunch.



One of the quirks of the free meals program is that a carton of milk requested by a student who brought lunch from home is not reimbursable. Rep. Kim Hicks (DFL Rochester) is planning to introduce legislation next session to have the state pay for that carton of milk. MSNA will work with the legislature on the details of this bill as it develops next session. Given the tight state budget forecast, which shows a modest deficit developing in the next budget cycle, it could be difficult to get a free milk program passed in 2024. There may be an appetite for some one-time spending, and helping schools retire old meal debt is something we will bring up as a help to our nutrition programs.

Lastly, we know there are interest groups who want the state to develop health standards, through a Minnesota Department of Education rule-making process, across a broad array of topics, including nutrition. Currently, health standards are created at the school district level. We believe any state health standards should be focused on physical and mental health, with nutrition education as a component. Free meals, by definition under USDA guidelines, are the healthiest meal option most people will encounter. We'll remind the legislature of that fact and ask them and the MN Department of Education to respect the federal meal guidelines and not encumber the Minnesota free meals program with conflicting school meal standards.

After passing monumental legislation, our state leaders will want to hear from you on how Minnesota Free School Meals have been implemented in your schools. Your opportunity to do so is to join us at MSNA's *Day at the Capitol* on Monday, March 11, 2024. This event will be held in L'Etoile du Nord Vault Room B15 in the basement of the Capital. This reception style event gives a more relaxed atmosphere for you to visit with legislators and snack on school lunch samples. Registration information will be coming out in early 2024. Save the date on your calendars now! We look forward to seeing you.

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