



The National School Lunch Program in Alaska

Causes for Decline; Questions of Need

By Arthur E. Hippler, William R. Alves, and Patricia DeRoche

Some observers have feared that the steady decline of Alaska student participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) along with abandonment of the program by some school districts may result in malnutrition among certain school children in Alaska. Thus, at the joint request of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Alaska Department of Education, the authors undertook a study both of the causes for declining participation and of the nutritional need for the program. The following article summarizes major findings of the study.

Background

The NSLP in Alaska has its historical roots in the public concern over malnutrition of school children (which reached its apogee in the 1930s) and the belief that "proper" nutrition aids educational achievement. The national program provides money and surplus food commodities for participating districts. These districts in turn provide students with lunches (that must meet federal nutritional standards) at full, reduced, or no cost, depending on federal guidelines for eligibility based on parental income.

Recent Findings

Results of the National Health and Nutrition Education Survey (1975) in the contiguous states suggest that the earlier expressed concern over child malnutrition in the U.S. is not presently supported by the average nutritional intake of even the most deprived classes of children. Moreover, recent analyses of school lunch programs fail to show a clearcut nutritional or educational benefit. The best information presently suggests that (1) it is infantile malnutrition that results in impoverished learning capacity, and (2) it is very difficult to reverse such effects. Short of serious malnutrition, nutritional status seems to have little effect on child learning.

Beyond this, the national research suggests that children who are truly malnourished tend to come

from multiple-problem families, and no mass nutritional program (which would address only one of a complex of problems) would have much effect on them. Finally, actual nutritional needs, contrary to conventional wisdom, are not well known, and hence, nutritional standards have been set at extremely high levels to provide a substantial safety margin.

Alaska Case vs. U.S.

Our own analysis of nutritional intake, derived from a Public Health Service study of six villages in southwest Alaska, shows that Eskimos there (whom some might believe poorly nourished) generally achieve the same high nutrient intake as do children in the rest of the United States. Other research of recent vintage done in North Alaska shows no appreciable nutritional deficiencies there and *no* clinical evidence of malnutrition.

Thus, the basic assumptions that U.S. (and Alaska) children are poorly nourished and that this is affecting their scholastic achievement seem at best, unproven (which is not to say there are no malnourished children). In addition, individual children as well as school districts are abandoning the program; many educators doubt the need for the program; and often, children do not like the food.

Local Opposition to NSLP

Local opposition to NSLP tends to center around the program being a serious financial and administrative burden. From 1972 to 1976, student participation in the NSLP in Alaska declined 20 percent while school population rose by 10 percent. In part, this is because the amount of the Federal lunch subsidy is based on the cost of providing lunches in other states and hence covers a smaller percentage of Alaska's higher food preparation and service costs. In assessing the relative importance of the many factors that might discourage students from

issue is quite often emotional, and proponents may unfairly characterize opponents of NSLP as being unfeeling toward children, we suggest a re-examination of the purposes of the program and careful scientific research to provide the basic information needed for a proper decision on this matter. And we forewarn the reader that such information must be carefully evaluated before the essentially political decision is made to maintain or drop the program.

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The 180-page Hippler-Alves-DeRoche report is available in Xerox copies at 10 cents per page or on microfiche for \$2.75 per copy from the Institute of Social and Economic Research, 707 A St., Suite 206, Anchorage, Alaska 99501 Phone 278-4621.

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purchasing a full-price NSLP lunch, the authors found that price alone accounted for about 33 percent of the variation in full-price participation among districts, the economic health of school district residents accounted for 25 percent, and the remaining percent-age appears to be explained by non-economic factors. The relatively small part of student population in Alaska that qualifies for free or reduced-price meals further depresses program participation in the state. High program costs and the decline in NSLP participation, especially by those eligible to receive free lunches (the group supposedly most in need) has convinced at least two large districts, Fairbanks and Juneau, to drop the program.

Conclusions

While increased efficiency in program management, higher federal subsidies, and possible state subsidies would likely stem the decline in participation, there is ample evidence to challenge the apparent nutritional purpose of the program. Since debate on the

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