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## **Op-Ed: Partners Sought to Help Feed Students During Summer Break**

*By Debbie Critchfield, Superintendent of Public Instruction and Denise Dixon, Executive Director of the Idaho Hunger Relief Task Force*

While the calendar reminds us that we're in the heart of winter, the warmth of summer will be upon us before we know it. For many of us, that means backyard cookouts and fresh produce from the garden.

But for some Idaho children, summers can mean a lack of food. When they're dismissed from class on the last day of school, students lose access to regular lunchroom meals. In some cases, these school day vitamins and nutrients are their most reliable source of nutrition.

To address this need, the Idaho Department of Education organizes a statewide Summer Food Service Program that provides free meals, Monday through Friday, in communities determined by need. Kids up to the age of 18 can show up for a nutritious meal, no questions asked. Site sponsors keep a tally of meals served and are reimbursed with USDA funds. The program started in 1975 as a means of supplementing a student's summer food access. It's 100 percent optional and no names or other information is collected from the children or their families.

Historically, the program has been best suited for students in cities and towns. They could easily access the meals at their local libraries, a church parking lot or a city park. Kids last summer could access the meals at more than 230 locations across Idaho. That will be the case again this year, but the program is also adapting to allow for more participation in **rural** areas.

This summer, sponsors in rural communities will have the option of offering a week's worth of food all at once. This means students and their parents can show up once and receive enough food to benefit the child throughout the week. This option means rural students who can't get to town every day can still benefit from the program.

It also means we want to increase sponsor participation in these areas. While we're always looking for new sponsors to grow the program's reach and feed more students anywhere, our organizations are especially focused on cultivating more sponsors in rural Idaho. Sponsors can include public or

private nonprofit schools, local nonprofits, churches, cities and camps. Training for sponsors is required and will be provided by the Idaho Department of Education in the coming weeks.

We've all heard the saying that it takes a village to raise a child. This is a perfect opportunity for organizations who understand the need to step forward and help some of the most vulnerable members of their communities. Helping feed Idaho students while they're away from their school lunchrooms ensures that they can come back to school nourished, energized and prepared to learn. The Summer Food Service Program is a practical way to invest in their education and keep our communities healthy. And, whether our sponsors are serving a single meal or helping students with a week's worth of nutrition, they make themselves pivotal to the success of our young people.

To learn more, please visit <https://sde.idaho.gov/cnp/sfsp/index.html>.

We hope you'll consider taking part.

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