

**CONCLUSION:** A review of the nutrition programs for 50 Mississippi school districts in FY 2023 showed opportunities for districts to strengthen their programs and increase efficiency. For example, 34 (69%) of the 49 reporting districts did not participate in an alternative breakfast program, which can increase breakfast participation rates, thereby increasing program revenues. There was also wide variance in the performance of districts in key areas such as meals per labor hour, suggesting that districts have room for improvement. As a whole, reporting districts performed favorably compared to regional and national peers in certain areas (e.g., overall costs per meal), while districts underperformed peers in other areas (e.g., breakfast participation rates and number of meals per labor hour).



### BACKGROUND

In FY 2025, PEER received funding to contract with Glimpse K12 (now Level Data) to conduct a comparative review of 50 school districts. This report focuses on one of six non-instructional areas of review—nutrition (Volume IV). Other non-instructional reports include:

- Finance and Supply Chain (Volume I);
- Human Resources (Volume II);
- Information Technology (III);
- Operations (Volume V); and,
- Transportation (Volume VI).

### KEY FINDINGS

- Of 49 districts reporting, 100% utilize “offer versus serve,” which allows students to decline some of the food offered. The goal of “offer versus serve” is to reduce food waste.
  - **34 (69%) did not participate in an alternative breakfast program.** Alternative breakfast programs can increase program revenues and may positively impact student performance.
  - **24 (49%) did not use cycle menus, which are repeated over a specific period of time.** Cycle menus can help manage food buying costs, increase efficiency, and provide for more enjoyable meals for students.
  - **Three (6%) reported that there are multiple designees responsible for ordering food for the district.** This could result in higher food costs.
- **There was wide variation in districts’ performance on key indicators. For example, the number of meals per labor hour across reporting districts ranged from 8.6 to 26.6, which suggests that many districts have room for improvement.** Meals per labor hour is a key measure of efficiency in school nutrition programs. Generally, a higher number of meals per labor hour indicates greater efficiency.

### Strategies for Improving a District’s Meals Per Labor Hour

- Simplify the menu by offering healthy and nutritious options that can be easily prepared.
- Use standardized recipes to ensure meals are consistent in quality and quantity, reducing labor and minimizing waste.
- Optimize the kitchen layout and equipment, investing in high-capacity ovens, mixers, or food processors to streamline meal preparation.
- Implement time-saving techniques, such as batch cooking, ingredient prepping, and using prepared foods.
- Provide training for staff on cooking techniques, equipment usage, and food safety.
- Monitor and adjust labor costs regularly to optimize labor costs without compromising meal quality.

## A Look at Selected FY 2023 District Cost Metrics

- **Breakfast Participation Rate:** The rate for reporting districts ranged from 19% in Ocean Springs to 100% in North Bolivar. The median rate for all districts of 45% was well below the regional peer average of 58.5%.
- **Lunch Participation Rate:** The rate for reporting districts ranged from 46% in West Bolivar to 100% in North Bolivar and Gulfport. The median rate for all districts of 72% was equal to the regional peer average.
- **Overall Cost per Meal:** The cost per meal ranged from \$1.35 in Western Line to \$8.16 in Jefferson Davis. The median cost for all districts was \$4.07, which compares favorably to regional and national peers.
- **Fund Balance Measured in Number of Months of Average Program Expenses:** Fund balances ranged from just over one-half month of expenses in Columbia to approximately 16 months in Tunica County.
  - The federal COVID-19 waiver allowing districts to have more than three months of nutrition program expenses in reserve has expired and districts with more than three months of fund balance reserves compared to average monthly expenses must develop a plan to use the funds for allowable purchases such as necessary supplies and equipment.

**Estimated annual cost savings: Up to \$1.7 million for food and labor cost improvements**

**Additional projected revenues: Up to \$7.6 million by increasing breakfast and lunch participation rates**

See Exhibit 13 on page 32 for a summary of cost savings and additional revenues by district.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTRICTS

1. In FY 2026, each district superintendent, in consultation with the district's nutrition personnel, should review the information from this report and implement each of the relevant district recommendations to increase efficiency, improve service levels, and/or achieve cost savings.
2. For districts unable to provide benchmarking or performance information during this review pertaining to their nutrition programs (or provided questionable data), relevant district personnel should take action to begin collecting and monitoring precise data on an ongoing basis.
3. District personnel should provide an annual performance report to the district superintendent regarding the status of the nutrition programs using the measures included in this review.
4. District administrators should use the information from annual performance reports to monitor their district's costs and efficiency in administering their nutrition programs.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (MDE)

1. MDE should develop guidance to assist districts in increasing breakfast participation rates. MDE could use the *Colorado Department of Education's Guide to Increasing School Breakfast Participation* as a starting point in developing a guide for Mississippi's school districts.
2. MDE should develop guidance for districts to improve their meals per labor hour (MPLH).
3. MDE should develop guidance for school districts on using any excess reserves in their nutrition funds for allowable expenses that could contribute to a more efficient nutrition program.