

Education

Study: Few Hawaii Students Have Access To After-School Meals

A new report by the Food Research & Action Center shows Hawaii near the bottom in terms of serving an after-school supper to low-income students.

By Suevon Lee    / April 19, 2018

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Hawaii outshines most other states when it comes to providing after-school programs for elementary-age kids. But there's one area where it seriously lags behind: serving meals during those hours to low-income children, according to a new national study.

Hawaii ranks among the bottom when it comes to serving after-school suppers, which, unlike a mere snack, must satisfy five food components including a protein, serving of milk, one serving of grain and two servings of fruits and/or vegetables.

On average nationally, 5 percent of children that qualified for free- and reduced-price lunch also received an after-school meal in October 2016. In Hawaii, only 0.3 percent of eligible students received an after-school meal.

A qualifying after-school meal must meet five food components per USDA guidelines, including a protein, vegetable and grain like this school lunch.

That's according to [“Afterschool Suppers: A Snapshot of Participation,”](#) published in March by the Food Research & Action Center. The study is so named because it collected data only for October 2016, as opposed to a full school year.

“Hawaii has a great tradition of offering after-school for our kids,” said Paula Adams, executive director of the Hawaii Afterschool Alliance. “We are ranked in the top 10, compared with the bottom three for after-school meals.”

Hawaii is one of only 17 states that fund after-school programs, and it's the only state in the country with a statewide after-school program in all elementary-level public schools, [known as A+](#). The initiative began in 1989 under then-Gov. John Waihee to provide affordable after-school options to Hawaii's kids and reduce the number of so-called latchkey kids.

In 2014, 54,184 children in Hawaii, or 26 percent, participated in after-school programs, although another 36,500, or 17 percent, were left unsupervised between the hours of 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., according to [most recent data](#) collected by the national Afterschool Alliance.

In view of this robust enrollment rate — only the District of Columbia [showed a higher percentage](#) that year — the low number of Hawaii's kids reached through after-school suppers is a problem, say advocates. It exacerbates the high rate of food insecurity among Hawaii families and the lack of access to healthy, nutritious meals among low-income children.

“With the high level of poverty in our state, for some students, the after-school meal could be the last meal they have until they come back the next morning to have breakfast,” Adams said.

FRAC is the author of another recent national study showing that Hawaii [ranked near the bottom of states](#) when it came to families and students taking advantage of free breakfast. Kids who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch are also eligible for a free first meal of the day through participating schools.

In the recent report, FRAC found that the average daily participation in Hawaii for free or reduced price lunch was 67,612 in October 2016. But the number of students receiving after-school meals that same time frame was only 198. Only North Dakota reached fewer students with after-school meals.

The reason for Hawaii's meager showing is the high cost of food here and the need for after-school providers to get outside funding to cover costs. Unlike subsidized breakfast or lunches that are part of the National School Lunch Program, after-school meals are not provided directly by schools.

Outside providers, like the YMCA of Honolulu, can get federal reimbursement for these meals if 50 percent or more of kids at a site are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. But the \$4.01 federal reimbursement per after-school meal doesn't cover the cost of a full meal.

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A view of an attached Boys & Girls Club of Hawaii beside Washington Middle School on Waiola Street in Honolulu.

Since 2012, YMCA of Honolulu has received funding from the Walmart Foundation to provide both after-school and summer meals at four elementary schools on Oahu: Honowai Elementary, Waipahu Elementary, August Ahrens Elementary and Leihoku Elementary. The center also runs a program through its branch in Kalihi.

Other after-school providers include the Boys & Girls Club of Hawaii, which operates various sites statewide. They don't serve meals, but may serve a snack, such as Cheez-Its, Apple Jacks and milk. A sample after-school meal, on the other hand, might consist of spaghetti with wheat bread, a tossed salad, orange and milk, according to Alissa Taniguchi, YMCA of Honolulu's program director.

"It exposes kids to fresh fruits and vegetables," she said of the meals. When kids go home, "they ask for oranges."

Hawaii's A+ program is not free — it costs \$110 per kid for the 2017-2018 school year unless a family qualifies for a subsidy. The state Department of Education operates some of these programs directly and contracts with outside groups at other sites. The DOE serves snacks when 50 percent or more of enrollees are eligible for free or reduced lunch; federal reimbursement is available at \$1 per snack.

Advocates believe the option of after-school meals may persuade even more kids to take advantage of after-school programs, which [research shows](#) can improve homework completion rates and classroom behavior.

"I think we all know if there's a meeting and there's going to be food, adults will be more likely to go," said Nicole Woo, senior policy analyst at the Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law & Economic Justice. "I think it's common sense now that if you're offering a snack or supper (at an after-school program), you're more likely to draw kids in."

Schools nationwide reached a total of 1.1 million low-income kids with after-school meals in October 2016. FRAC recommends states reach at least 15 children through the after-school supper program for every 100 low-income children who eat school lunch. Only the District of Columbia has met this goal, while California and Vermont come close.

If each state met this goal, an additional 2.2 million low-income children would benefit from an evening meal, FRAC said.

In addition to working on increasing after-school meals for children, there's another effort afoot in Hawaii: to try and reach the middle schoolers through after-school programming. That age group is particularly susceptible to high-risk behavior, according to Adams.

A state House bill would provide funding for after-school programs at several intermediate and middle schools on the neighbor islands designated as Title I and which have a high number of Native Hawaiian students. The proposed Senate budget also includes \$1.6 million in after-school funding for these schools.

“The number one age for juvenile arrests is age 14. When you see the statistics, it's (kids from) a lot of Hawaiian and neighbor island schools,” said Senate Ways and Means Chairman Donovan Dela Cruz. “The better thing to do is keep them in school, some form of school. It's really prevention in the long run.”

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