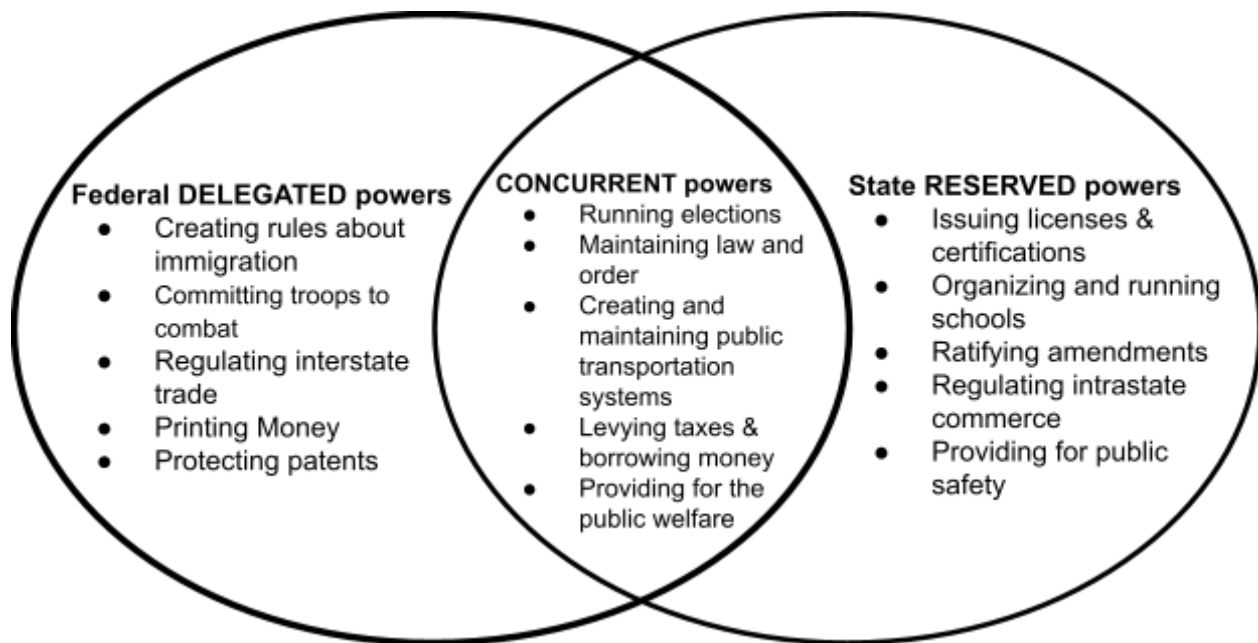


Activity: How the Federal School Lunch Program Became a Spicy Political Debate

Background: The federal school lunch program serves nearly 5 billion meals annually, with benefits for the health and academic performance of the 29 million students who take part. Retro Report traces the transformation of the program from a 1946 initiative addressing malnutrition into an effort caught up in debates about everything from the federal deficit to teenage obesity to government intervention in people's lives. Students will explore federal and state school lunch policies beginning with the Reagan administration's cuts to the national school lunch program through to state-level efforts to expand free lunch access. Students will use their knowledge to build policy posters about school lunch access.

Objective: Analyze the United States system of federalism and examine how that system affects the school lunch program.

Review the graphic about the distribution of power in the system of federalism for the United States. Use this information to consider what level of government would be best suited for making and implementing policy about school lunches.



Federalism and school lunch:
How are they connected?

Who has the power regarding public school lunch funding decisions? (The federal government, state government or both?) Explain.

Watch the Retro Report video “[How the Federal School Lunch Program Became a Spicy Political Debate](#)” ([Transcript](#)) and answer the prompts below.

Why is school lunch policy considered controversial?

What happened when William Hoagland was appointed by President Reagan in 1981 to oversee the National School lunch program?

When did the national school lunch program begin? What was its purpose?

What were some of the consequences of the Reagan administration’s cutback on school lunch funding?

How did the Covid pandemic affect school lunch policies?

Answer the following questions with your partner or group after reviewing the Retro Report video:

To what extent do states and the federal government cooperate to provide free lunches to students at school?

Read and Analyze the following text excerpts by answering the questions which follow to learn more school lunch policy.

Excerpt #1 from [States Step in as End of Free School Meal Waivers Looms](#) | NCSL (July 2022):

Some states have expanded their offerings and flexibilities for school breakfast. Utah (H 222) created a program that requires all schools with 30% or more of their students applying for free or reduced-price meals to provide the option for students to receive breakfast after the school day begins. Massachusetts (H 4218) created a similar alternative breakfast service model with its Breakfast After the Bell Program, which provides breakfast during the instructional part of the day to all students at high-poverty schools. Kentucky (S 151) allows schools to reallocate 15 minutes of instructional time for breakfast.

Other states have expanded meal options during other parts of the day. Virginia (H 2135) required all schools in which 50% or more of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals to participate in an Afterschool Meal Program, which expands the number of meals the schools provide.

Illinois (S 805) required schools to develop an Unused Food Program, allowing third-party organizations to offer leftover school meals to low-income children to take home. This helps fight food insecurity by providing students with additional meals and reduces food waste. Alabama (H 566) passed a similar bill making this an option available to schools.

How have **state governments** involved themselves with school lunch programs? Use a specific example from the excerpt to explain.

What problems are states attempting to address with these policies? Provide an example from the text or video to support your response.

Excerpt #2 from [States Step In as End of Free School Meal Waivers Looms](#) | NCSL (July 2022):

School Meal Debt

South Carolina (H 3006) prohibited schools from using collection agencies to recover unpaid meal fees and banned schools from applying interest, fees or monthly penalties for outstanding school meal debt. Virginia (H 583) prevented schools from keeping students with school meal debt out of extracurricular activities. New York (S 5151) barred schools and districts from taking legal action against parents or guardians for unpaid meal fees.

Nutrition and Farm-to-School Programs

States have passed a variety of bills to improve the nutrition of the school meals that students receive. West Virginia (H 3073) passed a bill to assess student eating habits and nutrition to examine how to enhance school meals. Wyoming (H 52) created a project that provides grants to promote protein-rich diets with Wyoming-grown meat. Illinois (H 4089) required all schools to provide a plant-based diet option for students.

Forty-three states have established farm-to-school programs, which encourage healthy eating and to support local farms by promoting the purchase of fresh, locally grown produce. Additionally, many farm-to-school programs promote garden and nutrition education programs. Arkansas (H 1615) and Nebraska (L 396) are the most recent states to establish programs.

Other Child Nutrition Bills

While most child nutrition bills are directly related to school meals, some states are trying other approaches. For example, Illinois (S 1846/H 3490) regulates the drinks restaurants serve to children to

ensure that beverages served with meals are nutritious, with less-healthy drinks available by request. Missouri (H 432), with its Protection of Vulnerable Persons Act, provides vouchers for pregnant women and families with infants and children under 5 to use for eligible food at farmers markets."

How have **state governments** involved themselves with school lunch programs? Use a specific example from the excerpt to explain.

What is the problem that states are attempting to address with these policies? Use a specific example from the excerpt to explain.

Excerpt #3 from [How Free School Meals Went Mainstream](#) | The New York Times (May 2024)

Advocates for free school meals have pushed for them to be offered to every student for a long time, but saw significant progress in the last decade and a half. Their first big win came quietly, in 2010, when Congress passed an under-the-radar policy called the community eligibility provision [*C.E.P.*], which made it easier for schools to serve free meals to all. Then, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the federal government let every public school student eat for free, rapidly transforming the nation's thinking around school meals.

Eight states have passed their own universal free meal legislation since the federal largesse [*grant of money*] ended in 2022. Dozens more have introduced similar bills or have one in the works.

...But in one draft federal budget, House Republicans proposed ending the C.E.P. altogether, arguing that public funds shouldn't pay for wealthy children to eat lunch. Jonathan Butcher, an education researcher at the Heritage Foundation, believes school lunch aid has ballooned far beyond its original intent. He would like to see the provision repealed.

"They're not just saying, 'How can we better get food to kids that need it? They're saying: 'Eh, let's not bother with the details. Let's just give it to everybody'," Mr. Butcher said. "That's not being respectful to taxpayers, nor is it advancing the idea that we should improve a very wasteful school lunch program."

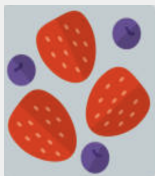
How is the **federal government** involved with school lunch programs? Use a specific example from the excerpt to explain.

Why might some people or policymakers not want the federal government to be

involved with school lunches? Use a specific example from the excerpt to explain.	
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Create a poster about state and federal school lunch policy. Use the prompts below as you plan/ draw each section of the lunch tray.

[What's for Lunch? Lunch Tray Policy Poster Template](#)

	The Utensils: The tool for making the meal work. Based on what you've learned about federalism and school lunch policy, what is the best way to approach providing meals to students at school, state policy, federal policy, or a combination of both? Why?	
	The Main Dish: The big policy goal. What policy about school lunch will you advocate for? You can describe a policy from the video or reading excerpts (this can be just one state or federal policy or a mix of both) or you can create your own. Be as specific as you can.	
	The Fruit: What sweetens the policy and makes it appealing? Why would this be the best policy for students? Provide reasoning to support your main dish.	
	The Vegetables: What provides essential "nutrients" or information about your policy goal? Help us understand your policy with two concepts or ideas from your readings and the video. These can be short phrases or key terms. For each concept or idea, write a sentence or two to explain or define it.	Concept/ Idea: Explanation: Concept/ Idea: Explanation:
	The Drink: What washes everything down... Create a tagline or short sound-bite statement that reflects how your policy goal helps fulfill the goal of "providing for the general welfare" presented in the Constitution's preamble.	