

How the Federal School Lunch Program Became a Spicy Political Debate



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

Overview: 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.

Subjects: Civics/ Government, AP Government

- For AP Government, this lesson could be used in Unit 1 while addressing the concept of Federalism.

Grade Level: 9-12

Lesson Duration:

- Two 45-minute class periods
 - Allow additional time for any of the extension activities.

Essential Questions:

- How do the principles of federalism affect the school lunch program?
- To what extent do states and the federal government cooperate to provide free lunches to students at school?

Lesson Objectives:

Students will:

- Identify the distribution of power in a system of federalism.
- Describe and analyze the impact of federalism on providing school lunches to students.

Materials:

- Retro Report video "[How the Federal School Lunch Program Became a Spicy Political Debate](#)" ([Transcript](#))
- [Student Activity](#) handout
- [What's for Lunch? Lunch Tray Policy Poster Template](#)
- Optional: poster paper and art supplies for step 5
 - [States Step in as End of Free School Meal Waivers Looms](#) | NCSL (July 2022)
 - [New State and Federal Policies Expand Access to Free School Meals](#) | NCSL (July 2022)
 - [How free School Meals Went Mainstream](#) | The New York Times (May 2024)

Procedure:

1. Review & Activate Background Knowledge: Begin by directing students to the graphic on the Student Activity handout of the powers delegated to the federal government, reserved to the states as well as concurrent powers. As needed, briefly review that the Constitution creates a federal system of government, along with the definitions of delegated, reserved, and concurrent powers. Write “Federalism and School Lunch” on the board, and elicit student responses for how these two topics might be connected.
2. Next, students will use this information to consider what level of government would be best suited for making and implementing policy about school lunches.
3. Have students watch the Retro Report video **“How the Federal School Lunch Program Became a Spicy Political Debate”** and answer the related questions on the Activity handout.
 - a. What happened when William Hoagland was appointed by President Reagan in 1981 to oversee the National School lunch program?
 - b. When did the National school lunch program begin? What was its purpose?
 - c. What were some of the consequences of the Reagan administration’s cut-back on school lunch funding?
 - d. How did the Covid pandemic affect school lunch policies?
4. After watching, have students collaborate in small groups or pairs to answer the essential question using what they learned from the video:
 - a. To what extent do states and the federal government cooperate to provide free lunches to students at school?
5. Direct students to the text analysis section of the Activity handout. Students will read excerpts about state and federal actions on student lunch policy. This may be done independently, or with the teacher reading aloud with students following along. Students should then answer the prompts following each excerpt. Review answers as a class, as needed.
6. Finally, have students complete the prompts on the Student Activity handout to assist them as they create a poster synthesizing their learning about state and federal school lunch policy. Students may work independently or in pairs to create their poster. They may create their own artistic version using poster paper and other art supplies or make and use a copy of this [Poster Template: What’s for Lunch?](#) Consider displaying the posters.
 - a. Template created by A. Niese [with an image from istockphoto](#)

Extension Activity:

1. Use the **Respectful Conversations in Schools™ strategy** with the topic of “School Lunch” to help students reflect on and speak from their own experience, listen carefully to classmates and ask questions of genuine interest to deepen empathy and understanding. Adapt the [slide deck](#) and [Student Activity](#) handout from [this Retro Report lesson](#) as necessary. Select “File>Make a Copy” to eliminate, edit or reorder any of the modular sections on the activity handout.
 - a. This extension will take a full class period. Recommended placement is immediately before step 1 of this lesson or between steps 4 and 5.
2. **Gallery Walk of the Lunch Tray Posters & Final Writing Task:** Have students present their final lunch tray posters in a gallery walk activity. After hanging up posters, ask students to rotate around to different posters (every two to four minutes) to review the policy ideas of their peers. While rotating around the room, students will leave post-it notes on their peers’ posters with (a) questions

that come up as they review the policy solutions and (b) comments to highlight something they read or were surprised by. After students return and read the comments/questions left by their peers, the entire class can debrief on a final verbal discussion or written assessment based on this lesson's essential question: To what extent do states and the federal government cooperate to provide free lunches to students at school?

3. **Gallery Walk of Lunches & Cultural Norms:** Using the article [What's On Your Plate? A Look at School Meals Around the World](#) | U.N. World Food program (May 2023), conduct a gallery walk (or divide up the eight countries discussed in the article), ask students to share common foods consumed during school lunch by other students around the world and ways in which their country, or an intergovernmental organization like the U.N., can help support school lunch policy. Students can also follow up with a discussion on how well their own school's school lunch reflects local, state or national cultures and traditions. If students felt strongly that their own school's lunch could be improved or changed, students might individually or in groups draft a letter to their school board (or relevant state agency) advocating for change.
4. **Exploration of Current State Policies:** Using their own state's legislative assembly database (links to state databases can be found at [Legislature Links](#) | Statescape), students may research what current school lunch policies are being considered in their state and evaluate whether or not they agree with these policies, or how they might modify them if they were the policy-maker.

Additional Resources:

- [States that Have Passed Universal Free School Meals \(So Far\) – *Update*](#) | New York City Food Policy Center, Hunter College (April 2024)
- [How Free School Meals Went Mainstream](#) | The New York Times (May 2024)

Relevant Standards/ Frameworks:

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies

- **D1.2.9-12.** Explain points of agreement and disagreement experts have about interpretations and applications of disciplinary concepts and ideas associated with a compelling question.
- **D1.4.9-12.** Explain how supporting questions contribute to an inquiry and how, through engaging source work, new compelling and supporting questions emerge.
- **D2.Civ.1.9-12.** Distinguish the powers and responsibilities of local, state, tribal, national, and international civic and political institutions.
- **D2.Civ.3.9-12.** Analyze the impact of constitutions, laws, treaties, and international agreements on the maintenance of national and international order.
- **D2.Civ.5.9-12.** Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.
- **D2.Civ.7.9-12.** Apply civic virtues and democratic principles when working with others.
- **D2.Civ.10.9-12.** Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.
- **D2.Civ.11.9-12.** Evaluate multiple procedures for making governmental decisions at the local, state, national, and international levels in terms of the civic purposes achieved.
- **D2.Civ.13.9-12.** Evaluate public policies in terms of intended and unintended outcomes, and related consequences

- **D2.Civ.14.9-12.** Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

Common Core Literacy Standards

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.9** Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.9** Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

AP US Government & Politics

- **LO1.7.A** Explain how the constitutional allocation of power between the national and state governments affects society.
- **LO1.9.A** Explain how the distribution of powers between national and state governments impacts policymaking.

About the Author:

Allie Niese is a James Madison Fellow and member of civic learning organizations including Retro Report, the National Constitution Center, Constitutional Democracy Project and the New Literacy Project. She holds a master's degree from Northwestern and teaches AP Government and Civics at William Howard Taft High School in Chicago.