
FAMILY MESSAGE - Update on School Funding/Meal Programs

Mustang Families,

There has been a lot of news lately about school funding and student meals. We want to share what we know about two major issues currently affecting Mustang Public Schools and districts across the state.

Federal Funding on Hold

In late June, the U.S. Department of Education temporarily delayed more than \$53 million in federal funding intended for Oklahoma schools. As part of this, Mustang is facing a shortfall of approximately \$470,000 in the 2025-2026 school year. These funds typically support:

- Mentoring for teachers on alternative and emergency certifications
- Services for English learners
- Technology and learning tools
- Professional development for teachers
- Family engagement nights

This Spring, we were told to expect a flat budget (the same amount as the previous year), but the funding has now been frozen at the federal level. Despite the lack of available funding, we are still required to meet federal mandates, just with fewer resources. As a result of this funding freeze, we are exploring every available option to protect the programs that support our students and staff.

OSDE Meal Mandate

Recently, the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) announced that all districts will be required to provide free meals to all students beginning with the 2025-2026 school year. We agree that no child should go hungry at school. That's why it's especially challenging to be asked to expand meal service without the additional funding required to do so responsibly. Here are the facts for Mustang:

- It would cost a minimum of \$5.1 million per year to offer breakfast and lunch to all students.
- Our child nutrition program is already operating at a deficit, despite strong community support through generous donations.
- Federal reimbursements do not cover the full cost of meals, and if the district were to pay 100%, we may lose access to those reimbursements altogether.
- We currently do not qualify for the full reimbursement Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) federal program, which allows some districts to offer free meals to all students.

At this time, no laws have changed, and no formal rules or guidance have been provided to districts by the OSDE. We remain focused on facts, not headlines, and are committed to thoughtful, student-centered planning should anything change.

What You Can Do

- **Fill Out the [Bronco Family Form](#)**

This [form](#) is critical to ensuring Mustang receives the federal funds our families already pay into through taxes. It helps determine:

- Federal funding for our schools
- Technology support and internet access
- Meal benefits for students who qualify (including, potentially, future CEP participation status)

If the form isn't completed, those dollars may be directed to other districts. Submitting the [Bronco Family Form](#) each year ensures these priorities are not lost.

- **Contact Your Legislators:** <https://www.congress.gov/members/find-your-member>

We encourage families to reach out to federal lawmakers and ask:

Why are my tax dollars that you, as a member of Congress, have already allocated/approved for school district funding being frozen? What is your plan to fund Mustang Public Schools for the 2025-26 school year (and beyond)?

We understand this is a lot to take in. If you'd like more detailed information about either of these topics, please see the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) below for a deeper look at funding, meal programs, and how this impacts Mustang. You can also email MERCcontact@mustangps.org.

Please know that our commitment to Mustang families and students has not changed. We will continue to communicate openly and plan responsibly, always keeping students at the center of every decision we make. Despite the challenges discussed here, we are excited to welcome students back into our classrooms on August 14, 2025, and look forward to partnering with you as we begin another wonderful school year in Mustang. As always, thank you for your continued trust and support.

Mustang Public Schools | Frequently Asked Questions

Federal Funding and School Meal Updates - July 2025

Federal Funds

What federal funds are currently on hold?

The U.S. Department of Education has temporarily delayed (or "impounded") several key education grants for the 2025–2026 school year. The affected programs include Title II (Professional Development), Title III (English Learners), and Title IV (Student Support & Academic Enrichment). The OSDE reports that they have received a preliminary notice for Title IV only, but no final notice/allocation.

How much money is Mustang at risk of losing?

Mustang Public Schools stands to lose approximately \$470,000 in the upcoming school year:

- *Title II: \$313,925.28*
 - *Title III: \$80,339.46*
 - *Title IV: \$76,345.25*
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What do these federal programs typically fund?

These funds help support:

- *Mentoring and training for teachers with emergency or alternative certifications*
 - *Programs and services for English learners*
 - *Technology tools, academic enrichment, and family engagement events like STEM or literacy nights*
 - *Professional development for teachers and staff*
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Are districts still expected to meet federal requirements without these funds?

Yes. Even though the funding is currently on hold, Mustang is still required to comply with the federal laws tied to these programs. This means we must find other ways to meet these obligations using local resources.

Did Mustang reject federal funding or miss a deadline that caused this freeze?

No. Mustang Public Schools has met all federal requirements and deadlines. The funding delay is entirely due to a federal-level review that impacts all Oklahoma districts. The decision was not made at the district level and is outside our control.

Why were these funds delayed?

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the delay is due to a transition between federal administrations. The department is reviewing program allocations to ensure alignment with federal priorities before issuing grant award notifications.

What is the Bronco Family Form, and why is it important?

The Bronco Family Form (formerly “free & reduced lunch form”) helps determine whether a student qualifies for free or reduced-price meals, but its importance goes far beyond the cafeteria. Completing this form helps the district qualify for critical federal funding, including the very programs that are currently on hold. It also impacts our technology infrastructure (such as eRate discounts), future eligibility for meal programs like CEP, and more.

If I don’t fill out the Bronco Family Form, what happens?

When families don’t submit the form, Mustang loses access to federal dollars that have already been set aside for public education. Those funds are redirected to districts that do collect the necessary information.

How does Mustang use the form information?

Data from the Bronco Family Form is used only to determine eligibility for federal programs and meal reimbursements. All information is handled confidentially and is not used for any other purposes.

What’s the difference between ‘withheld,’ ‘delayed,’ and ‘cut’ funding?

In this case, funds are currently “impounded,” which means they’ve been delayed, not permanently cut. However, without timely action from the U.S. Department of Education, the impact would feel the same: Mustang may have to operate without nearly half a million dollars in expected funding next school year.

Who can I contact to advocate for the release of these funds?

We encourage families to reach out to Oklahoma’s federal representatives, including U.S. Senators and Congressmembers, to request that the impounded education funds be released. Congress has already allocated these dollars for public education.

Child Nutrition/School Meals

Is Mustang Public Schools currently eligible for the federal CEP program that provides free meals to all students?

Mustang technically qualifies at the minimum threshold for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), but not at a level that makes full participation financially sustainable. Based on last year's numbers, Mustang would only be reimbursed for about 46% of meals at the free rate. The district would be required to cover the remaining costs locally, totaling a minimum of \$5 million annually.

How is Mustang's Child Nutrition program currently funded?

Our Child Nutrition program relies on a combination of federal reimbursements, student payments, and limited state support. While we receive different reimbursement rates based on a student's eligibility status (free, reduced, or paid), these funds do not cover the full cost of operating the program.

Can't we just use other district funds to cover student meals?

Unfortunately, no. Mustang's current child nutrition program already operates at a deficit, even with strong community support (donations) and federal reimbursements. Covering 100% of meals with no new funding would significantly impact other student programs and services.

Would paying for all student meals mean we lose federal reimbursements?

If the district were to cover 100% of meal costs, we could become ineligible for certain federal reimbursements, further increasing the cost to local taxpayers..

How much does it cost to feed all Mustang students?

To offer free breakfast and lunch to all ~13,500 Mustang students for an entire year would cost a minimum \$5.1 million. This estimate includes food, labor, and infrastructure needs.

What percentage of students currently participate in school meals?

In the 2024-2025 school year, approximately 19% of students participated in breakfast, and 54% participated in lunch districtwide.

Can Mustang handle a 100% participation increase with the current staff and facilities?

Not without significant changes. Based on projected participation, the district would need to hire additional food service staff and potentially expand prep and serving capacity. If new MAHA nutritional standards are enforced, further infrastructure upgrades may be required.

Why are some parents saying they shouldn't need to fill out the Bronco Family Form anymore?

There has been some confusion following recent public statements. Regardless of future mandates, the Bronco Family Form remains essential. Without it, Mustang cannot qualify for federal reimbursements that are critical to the school meal program and other services.

What's the risk if families stop submitting the Bronco Family Form?

If participation drops, Mustang could lose access to federal meal reimbursements and other funding tied to income-based eligibility. That would increase local costs, threaten student services, and make free meal programs even harder to implement.

Is it true that families are being "triple taxed" for school meals?

No. The "triple tax" narrative is misleading. Public school meals are primarily funded by federal reimbursements based on family income eligibility, with some local and state support. Families who don't qualify for free meals may pay out of pocket, but they are not being taxed three separate times. Tax dollars collected at the federal level are allocated back to schools based on eligibility data collected through forms like Mustang's Bronco Family Form. If families do not complete this form, Mustang loses access to those federal dollars. The only way to ensure your taxes benefit your own community is to complete the form each year.

What are the MAHA school meal standards being discussed?

As part of its announcement, OSDE introduced a new set of proposed guidelines called the "MAHA" standards. These would phase out seed oils, artificial dyes, processed meats, and other ingredients. While Mustang supports healthy meals, we have not received any official documentation about these new standards, and current vendors may not be able to meet those requirements at scale.

Is Mustang required to provide free meals to all students right now?

No. There is currently no state law or official OSDE rule that requires districts to begin offering universal free meals. Mustang will continue to monitor the situation and will respond responsibly if anything changes.

What is Mustang doing to prepare?

We are modeling scenarios to estimate staffing, facility, and equipment needs. However, without advance funding or clear guidance, we cannot guarantee that every need could be met by August 2025.

We are evaluating all available options while advocating for clear guidance and sustainable solutions. Our priority remains the same: supporting Mustang students with care, integrity, and fiscal responsibility.

Would we need to hire more staff to support universal free meals?

Yes. We estimate that meal participation could increase by 30% or more, requiring additional staff to support meal prep, service, and cleanup. This staffing need would come with significant cost and lead time, including hiring, training, and scheduling.

Would our current kitchen facilities and equipment be able to handle that increase?

Under our current operations, yes. However, if new nutritional guidelines like the proposed MAHA standards are enforced, we would need to evaluate additional kitchen upgrades, storage, and preparation equipment.

Can our current food vendors support the proposed MAHA nutritional standards?

No. There are currently not enough qualified vendors able to supply fresh, local, unprocessed ingredients at the scale that would be required. This is especially true for districts of our size. In addition, the existing vendor contracts and regulatory timelines do not allow for sudden changes to meal components or supply chains.

What would need to happen for Mustang to comply with the MAHA guidelines?

We would need:

- *More funding to cover the higher cost of ingredients and labor*
 - *More lead time to procure compliant vendors*
 - *Updated guidance from OSDE (none has been provided so far)*
 - *Clarity on enforcement mechanisms*
 - *Flexibility for sourcing challenges*
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How much advance notice would Mustang need to implement universal free meals responsibly?

At least one full calendar year. Food service planning operates on long procurement cycles—districts must submit vendor surveys and commodity preferences by March or April for the following school year. US Foods and other vendors begin processing those orders in July. Without a full-year runway, we cannot responsibly retool the system.

What are the key procurement deadlines Mustang must meet to plan school meals?

Food service operations must be planned and contracted months in advance; vendor surveys are due by March, and supply orders begin July 1. Without formal guidance early in the year, we cannot responsibly implement changes by August.

Each year:

- *By March 1: Vendor surveys are submitted to estimate ordering needs*
- *By April 1: Districts notify vendors of commodity usage for the following school year*
- *On July 1: Vendors begin processing orders for the year*

Missing or redoing these deadlines would disrupt food availability and compliance.

What is our current Free/Reduced Lunch (FRL) rate?

As of the most recent data, Mustang's FRL rate is approximately 48%. This includes students directly certified through programs like SNAP or Medicaid, as well as those who qualify through household income applications.

Why doesn't Mustang qualify for full reimbursement under the CEP program?

To qualify for full reimbursement through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), districts must have at least 62.5% of students directly certified (e.g., through SNAP, Medicaid, TANF, or foster care). Mustang's current direct certification rate is 28.6%, which only qualifies us for about 46% reimbursement. That leaves a significant funding gap that we would be required to cover, and no available funds to responsibly do so.

What counts as "administrative costs" under Oklahoma law?

Under Oklahoma's school finance regulations, administrative costs are defined much more broadly than just superintendent or principal salaries. These costs include any personnel or services not directly tied to classroom instruction, including school counselors, instructional coaches, central office support staff, curriculum specialists, assessment coordinators, and others who support student success behind the scenes. Many of these roles are crucial to maintaining academic standards, promoting student well-being, and ensuring compliance with state and federal education laws.

Is Mustang's administrative spending out of proportion?

No. Mustang's administrative cost percentage is currently 3.6%, well below the state cap of 5%. This means there is very limited room to cut administrative expenses to fund large-scale initiatives like universal meals.

Does Mustang Public Schools have a "carry over" similar to what is being reported for other Districts?

No. Mustang operates on a tightly balanced budget and does not have unallocated surplus funds that could be redirected to cover a minimum of a \$5.1 million annual cost for universal student meals. Like other districts, any reserves are allocated for legally restricted purposes such as building maintenance, transportation, or future obligations.

Additionally, the numbers quoted in the media for other Districts are likely inclusive of FY 2026 Bond dollars, which are specifically allocated based on the Bonds that have been approved by a vote of the community; those funds cannot be redirected for other causes, such as meal payments.

Lastly, any "surplus" or "carry over" that we do have is required by State law and is absolutely necessary to fund programs while we wait for reimbursements from grants (federal, state, and/or local).

Does OSDE have the authority to audit or penalize districts for not complying?

Currently, there is no state law requiring universal free meals. While OSDE has stated intentions to issue emergency rules or withhold funding, those actions would require approval by the State Board of Education and potentially the Governor. To date, no such rule has been proposed or enacted.

Does the State Superintendent have the legal authority to require free meals for all students?

No. According to the Oklahoma House Education Committee Chair, the State Superintendent does not have the constitutional or legal authority to direct how school districts allocate their budgets. Budget decisions are entrusted to locally elected school boards, not state agencies.

Can the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE) penalize districts that don't comply with the universal meals directive?

Not under current law. There is no legal basis for OSDE to impose sanctions or withdraw funding over district budget decisions. Any attempt to do so would likely be considered overreach and may not withstand legal scrutiny.

What's required for OSDE's proposed child nutrition rules to take effect?

Any emergency rule must be approved by the State Board of Education (SBE) and submitted to the Governor. If the agency wants to make it permanent, the rule must go through the full legislative process during the next session. The next regular SBE meeting is scheduled for July 24.

Has the Legislature supported universal free meals in the past?

The Oklahoma House has previously considered legislation, such as House Bill 1376 (2023), to expand free school meal access. However, these bills have not passed into law, and no current law mandates districts to offer free meals to all students.

Can't Mustang just "shift money around" in the budget to cover meals?

Public school budgets are governed by specific laws and funding streams. Most of our funds are tied to specific purposes, such as building maintenance, classroom instruction, or transportation. There is no legal or financial flexibility to simply move millions of dollars from one area to another without impacting essential services or potentially violating legal statutes.

Why didn't Mustang apply for CEP earlier?

Districts must apply for CEP each year by June 30. Mustang's current direct certification rate qualifies us at the minimum level, but our reimbursement rate would only cover less than half the cost of meals. After analyzing the financial impact, we determined that CEP is not a sustainable option for the 2025-2026 school year.

Have we received any official guidance or communication from OSDE about these mandates?

No. To date, Mustang Public Schools has not received any formal guidance, rules, or timelines from the Oklahoma State Department of Education. All information so far has come from public press releases and a parent email issued by the State Superintendent.

What is Mustang asking of state and federal leaders?

We are asking for: clear guidance, sustainable funding, and collaboration with districts on implementation. We share the vision of healthy, accessible meals for all students—but we believe that vision must be supported with resources and realism.