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Northwest Arctic Borough School District

The Northwest Arctic Borough School District (NWABSD) serves approximately 1,800 students across 11 remote communities in Northwest Alaska over 39,000 square miles, with district headquarters located in Kotzebue. The borough has a population of about 7,100 residents, and over 90% of district students are Alaska Native (Iñupiat). The NWABSD is one of the most remote school districts in Alaska, with most of the region located north of the Arctic Circle and all outside the Alaska road system, being accessible only by plane or boat.

Due to the region's high rates of poverty and economic need, all district schools participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). CEP allows high poverty schools to provide breakfast and lunch at no cost to 100% of enrolled students without requiring household meal applications. The federal reimbursement rate for CEP meals does not consider the geographic differential of remote areas.

The Child Nutrition Program is a critical support service for students and families across the Northwest Arctic. NWABSD provides nutritious school breakfast and lunches, and many schools also participate in the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP), which offers students free fresh produce during the school day to encourage healthy eating habits. For many children, school meals are among the most reliable and nutritious meals they receive each day.

Providing child nutrition in the rural Northwest Arctic presents unique logistical and financial challenges. All food must be transported long distances by barge (17% of the year) during a short summer season or flown by air cargo (83% of the year) into communities at significant expense. Weather delays, rising food costs, and limited storage capacity all affect food availability and menu variety. Supplying fresh produce to villages, particularly during winter months, is especially difficult. Many fruits and vegetables can freeze within 15 to minutes while sitting on airport runways or being transported from the airstrip to the schools by snowmachine or sled. Once thawed, items such as cucumbers, celery, lettuce, and tomatoes become watery and inedible, resulting in product loss and reduced availability.

NWABSD contracts with NANA Management Services to provide school meal service. The high cost of transportation significantly increases the overall cost of providing nutritious meals. Additionally, recruiting and retaining qualified nutrition staff in remote villages remains an ongoing challenge. The district is committed to balancing culturally appropriate and locally relevant foods with federal meal pattern requirements while expanding access to fresh fruits and vegetables in isolated communities.

Despite these challenges, NWABSD continues to pursue innovative strategies to improve student nutrition. Recent efforts include participation in the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP), the Department of Defense (DoD) Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, and grants such as the Farm to School and Local Foods Grant. The district looks forward to future grant opportunities and partnerships that will help reduce barriers to food access and strengthen child nutrition services through the Northwest Arctic.