

The Capitol Tablet

Wednesday, Jan. 21, 2026

Welcome to the North Dakota Legislature's special session! Gov. Kelly Armstrong called the session to have lawmakers decide how to spend \$199 million in federal rural health funds, an issue that could not be put off until the 2027 Legislature convenes its regular session on Jan. 5.

Lawmakers will be considering some education-related measures as well, most notably a \$65 million proposal to offer K-12 students breakfast and lunch at school -- at no charge to them, their parents or guardians -- beginning in the 2025-26 school year. Public and charter schools would automatically participate in the meals program, while nonpublic, tribal and Bureau of Indian Education schools could choose whether to take part.

Supporters of the school-meals program are already circulating a [ballot measure](#) that would establish a right to school breakfast and lunch for students, at no cost to them or their families. [Rep. Mike Nathe, R-Bismarck](#), the sponsor of the [school-meals legislation](#), believes it would be wiser for the program to be part of state law, instead of the North Dakota Constitution. A law may be changed in the future by the Legislature, while the constitution can be amended only by a statewide vote.

"I'd rather have (a school meals law) than put chicken nuggets in the constitution," said [Sen. Janne Myrdal, R-Edinburg](#), who called the move "strategically smart."

Nathe said supporters of the ballot measure were willing to stop their campaign in favor of his school-meals bill if it is approved by lawmakers. The initiative campaign has spurred enthusiasm for taxpayer-provided school breakfast and lunch. "The outpouring of public support for this is enormous," Nathe said.

The [Legislative Management Committee](#), which is made up of Republican and Democratic legislative leaders, has decided which bills will be debated during this week's special session. Other bills may be introduced if two-thirds of the state Senate and House agree to hear them, but that is unlikely to happen.

The session will consider five bills that relate to education. They are:

- [HB1621](#), which requires students in North Dakota's elementary, middle and high schools to participate in the [presidential youth fitness test](#), which includes standards for pull-ups and distance running. Hearing in [Joint Policy Committee](#), 11 a.m., Wednesday, 1/21.
- [HB1624](#), which provides \$65 million to pay for breakfast and lunch to K-12 students in public and public charter schools, at no cost to students or their families. The sum would cover a school year's worth of meals, beginning July 1. The 2027 Legislature, which convenes in January, would then revisit the issue. The meals would be provided regardless of a student's family income. Hearing in [Joint Appropriations Committee](#), 12:30 p.m., Wednesday, 1/21.
- [HB1626](#), which ensures that an early property tax payment discount applies before a homeowner receives the state's annual \$1,600 property tax credit for a primary residence. The Legislature approved the property tax credit program last year. Hearing in [Joint Policy Committee](#), 2:30 p.m., Wednesday, 1/21.
- [HB1627](#), which provides \$7 million to pay for school meals during the 2026-27 school year for students whose family income is no more than 300 percent of the federal poverty guidelines. For a family of four in 2026, that equals \$96,450 annually. At present, North Dakota provides free school meals for students whose family income is no more than 225 percent of poverty, or \$72,337 annually for a family of four. This bill would cover students in both public and nonpublic schools; [HB1624](#) does not apply to nonpublic schools unless they elect to participate. Hearing in [Joint Appropriations Committee](#), 1:30 p.m., Wednesday, 1/21.
- [SB2404](#), which provides \$1.5 million to help state agencies make their websites and digital content more accessible to people with disabilities. Hearing in [Joint Appropriations Committee](#), 3 p.m., Wednesday, 1/21.

The session's hearings and floor sessions will be livestreamed on the Legislature's website. The special session's homepage is [here](#). A list of livestreamed hearings and other proceedings is [here](#).

The session is expected to last for three days, but it is a special session, which means it does not have to follow the 80-day limit the North Dakota Constitution sets on legislative meetings every two years. In other words, the session will last for as long as the lawmakers themselves believe is necessary.

We expect to send out a wrapup version of the Capitol Tablet when the special session ends.

If you have any questions or comments about the Tablet, please email Dale Wetzel, public information specialist, North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, at dewetzel@nd.gov, or call 701-328-2247.

That's all for now. Cheers!

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