

The Capitol Tablet

Friday, Jan. 23, 2026

Sine Die Edition

They came. They saw. They voted. They adjourned.

The North Dakota Legislature finished its special session Friday. Lawmakers accomplished the session's principal goal, which was to approve bills that will help the state collect its first \$199 million installment of federal health care grants that are meant to assist rural areas.

However, the session's headline story was [HB1624](#), which included \$65 million to provide breakfast and lunch at no charge to all K-12 public school students, starting in the next school year. Nonpublic, charter, tribal and Bureau of Indian Education schools were given the option to participate in the meals program if they chose.

The North Dakota House approved the bill Thursday, 55-38. However, the state Senate has historically been a tougher hurdle for these ideas, and that proved true again on Friday, when senators voted 22-24 to defeat the measure. You can [watch and listen to the debate here](#). (Click 14th Order – Final Passage House Measures HB1624 on the right menu)

A separate school meals bill, [HB1627](#), was narrowly defeated on Thursday, 45-48. It sought to expand families' eligibility for free or reduced-price school meals, rather than follow the [HB1624](#) approach of providing them at no charge regardless of family income.

Lawmakers had hoped [HB1624](#) would halt the momentum of a [ballot initiative campaign](#) that would give students in K-12 public schools a constitutional right to breakfast and lunch at no charge to them or their families.

Once word of HB1624's defeat spread on social media Friday, supporters of the ballot measure vowed to campaign for [the success of the ballot measure](#), which they hope to [put on the November ballot](#).

Supporters of HB1624 said it had the advantage of taking effect this fall, during the 2026-27 school year. The ballot measure would not be effective until the fall of 2027 if it is approved by voters.

Legislators also prefer having the issue as part of state law, instead of the North Dakota Constitution, because the constitutional approach locks in spending on school meals – regardless of the state’s economic situation -- and cannot be changed without a statewide vote.

Here is a summary of additional education-related bills approved during this week’s special session:

- [HB1621](#) 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. The law gives the Department of Public Instruction authority to adopt state rules to make exceptions to the test. Gov. Kelly Armstrong signed the bill Friday after the special session concluded.
- [HB1626](#) ensures that a homeowner who qualifies for a discount by paying his or her property tax bill early will have the state’s annual \$1,600 primary residential property tax credit applied to the discounted amount.
- [SB2404](#) provides \$1.5 million to help state agencies make their websites and digital content more accessible to people with disabilities.

The defeat of HB1624 was not the first time the Legislature has rejected the idea of universal school meals for K-12 students, regardless of their ability to pay.

The concept of school meals for K-12 students at no cost to them gained wide acceptance during the COVID pandemic.

In March 2020, the federal government began paying to provide no-cost meals to all K-12 students. This arrangement ended in June 2022, and states were required to resume charging some students for school meals. This prompted debates in North Dakota and across the country about whether a free universal school meals policy should be permanent.

The North Dakota Legislature has grappled with the issue every session since then. Here is a timeline of developments on the school meals issue in recent years:

2021 Session:

[HB1413](#) requested an interim legislative study of “potential options of providing breakfast and lunch, free of charge, for all public school students.” Approved in House, 70-24; defeated in Senate, 9-37.

2023 session:

[HB1491](#) included \$6 million to provide meals without charge to K-12 students whose family incomes were no more than 200 percent of the federal poverty level. The [House version](#) covered only public school students, while the [Senate bill](#) also included students in nonpublic schools. The bill was approved in the House, 80-11, but was defeated in the Senate, 23-24.

[SB2284, Section 17](#) included \$6 million to provide meals without charge to K-12 public and nonpublic school students whose family incomes were no more than 200 percent of the federal poverty level. The provision was the main point of [HB1491](#), which was defeated in the Senate. Similar language was then included in [SB2284](#), which encompassed many education policy subjects. Approved in Senate, 42-4; approved in House, 77-15.

[HB1494](#) required schools to provide meals to students who requested them, regardless of whether they could pay or owed money for previous meals. The bill also barred any school from “identify(ing) or stigmatiz(ing) a student as receiving a free, reduced-price, or full-price meal, or a meal for which the child lacks funds to pay.” Approved in House, 90-1; approved in Senate, 47-0.

2025 session:

[HB1475](#) included \$140 million to provide meals without charge to all K-12 students in public, nonpublic, and tribal schools. Defeated in House, 39-54.

[HB1553](#) included \$140 million to provide meals without charge to all K-12 students in public and nonpublic schools. Defeated in House, 14-75.

[HB1013, Section 12](#): Included \$6 million to provide meals without charge to K-12 public and nonpublic school students whose family incomes were no more than 225 percent of the federal poverty level. This provision was included in the Department of Public Instruction’s budget bill. Approved in House, 60-28; approved in Senate, 46-0.

2026 special session:

[HB1624](#) provided \$65 million for breakfast and lunch to all K-12 public school students, at no cost to the students or their families, for the 2026-27 school year. Nonpublic, charter and Bureau of Indian Education schools would have the option of taking part in the meals program. Approved in House, 55-38; defeated in Senate, 22-24.

[HB1627](#), Included \$7 million for school meals during the 2026-27 school year for public and nonpublic school students whose family income was no more than 300 percent of federal poverty guidelines. For a family of four in 2026, that equals \$96,450 annually. Defeated in House, 45-48.

Other links of interest:

[USDA Income Eligibility Guidelines for Free/Reduced Price School Meals](#)

[USDA Eligibility Manual for School Meals](#)

[NDDPI School Meals Information](#)

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. Stay warm and have a good weekend!

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