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School Nutrition Association

# SNA and You: Working Together to Protect School Nutrition Programs

COVID-19 may have influenced legislative and regulatory priorities and forced adaptations in our advocacy approach, but the mission remains the same.



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# SNA and You: Working Together to Protect School Nutrition Programs

COVID-19 may have influenced legislative and regulatory priorities and forced adaptations in our advocacy approach, but the mission remains the same.

BY CATHY SCHUCHART

**In late March 2020**, life across the United States ground to an abrupt halt, as lockdowns were declared as the first line of defense in an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Just about everything stopped. But not school nutrition. Indeed, the service of school meals has been among the few constant, reliable aspects of pandemic life.



Behind the scenes, SNA's advocacy efforts in support of school nutrition professionals have also been a constant of pandemic life. Even before school closures were declared, the Association was looking ahead to their eventuality. On March 5, SNA sent a letter to then-U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue requesting that USDA urgently develop a robust action plan to make it easier for school districts to safely offer children meals during COVID-19 closures. At SNA's Legislative Action Conference (LAC), two days later Perdue, a panel of USDA representatives and then-Senate Agriculture Chair Pat Roberts (R-Kan.) each assured attendees of regulatory flexibility and financial support during the expected crisis.

While there are no crystal balls to see the future, 2020 proved unusually resistant to prediction. Is it any wonder that “pivot” became the one constant in all our activities? With each surprising twist—whether related to COVID-19 or the U.S. general election—SNA and its members adjusted their responses accordingly, all the while continuing to anticipate a spectrum of different scenarios in an effort to ensure they were ready to be effective in the *next* pivot.

It's too early to determine whether “pivot” will continue to be the prevailing strategy for 2021. We do know that the coronavirus will have an ongoing impact across society for months to come. We know there is a new Administration in the White House and a change in party dominance in Congress. And we know that another new year brings another set of brand-new opportunities for school nutrition professionals to leverage their collective power in an effort to protect and grow federal school meal programs.

In this article, we'll look *forward*—sharing SNA's 2021 *Position Paper*, previewing its 49th (and first virtual) annual LAC, scheduled for **March 8-10**, and outlining advocacy-related expectations for the next few months. We'll also look *back* at the past year for the context it provides on the year ahead when it comes to advocating for SNA's legislative and regulatory concerns and requests.

**Strengthening School Meal Programs = Fueling Student Success**

**The National School Lunch & Breakfast Programs** ensure students are nourished and ready to learn. These programs will be critical to our nation's pandemic recovery.

**AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME**  
 Healthy school meals for every student at no charge means

- ✓ Less food insecurity
- ✓ Improved test scores
- ✓ Better attendance & behavior
- ✓ An end to “free lunch” stigma
- ✓ No lunch debt for families/schools

**FILL THE COVID FUNDING GAP**  
 Allocate emergency funds for school meals

- ✓ Food, labor, packaging & PPE costs have spiked
- ✓ Govt. reimbursements declined
- ✓ 93% of nutrition directors concerned about \$\$\$ losses
- ✓ Budget shortfalls cut into education funds

**HOLD THE LINE**

- ✓ Prevent massive cuts to USDA Foods and state admin funds
- ✓ Use pre-pandemic data to calculate allotments

**CUT THE RED TAPE**

- ✓ Complex bureaucratic system diminishes focus on student service
- ✓ Maintain flexibilities for whole grains, sodium and milk

**IT'S TIME TO STEP UP FOR AMERICA'S STUDENTS!**

**SCHOOL NUTRITION ASSOCIATION**  
 Feeding Bodies. Fueling Minds.®  
 SchoolNutrition.org

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## HIGHLIGHTS OF SNA'S 2020 ADVOCACY EFFORTS

### MARCH 2020

- SNA Sends Letter to USDA Outlining Emergency Feeding Options to Prepare for Coronavirus School Closures
- SNA Releases Survey Highlighting Regulatory Challenges; Calls for Additional Waivers

### APRIL 2020

- SNA Urges USDA to Restore School Meal Flexibilities; Highlights Urgency, Given COVID-19 Procurement Challenges and Financial Impact of Closures on School Meal Programs
- SNA Joins 37 Allied Organizations in Letter to House/Senate Appropriations Committees Advocating for Funding to Help Offset Financial Losses to School Meal Programs; Urges \$2.6 Billion to Mitigate a Portion of the Estimated Loss

### MAY 2020

- SNA Urges Swift Passage of The Heroes Act
- SNA Releases COVID-19 School Meal Survey; Calls for Emergency Funds to Address Financial Crisis
- SNA Advocates for Kitchen Infrastructure and Equipment During COVID-19

## Pandemic-Prompted Priorities

Each year, SNA surveys its members to identify the top priorities the Association should seek to address through regulatory and/or legislative change. Survey responses are used to draft the Association's annual *Position Paper*, the centerpiece of the organization's advocacy efforts in Washington, D.C. That work begins in earnest at LAC, as SNA calls on its members to begin a grassroots campaign to share their experiences with lawmakers in Congress as firsthand evidence supporting SNA's various "asks."

It should come as no surprise that the four priorities identified in the 2021 *Position Paper* are a direct response to the challenges of school meal service in the COVID era. In some cases, these have been ongoing concerns, amplified considerably by the pandemic; others are unique to the situation SNA members now confront. Despite daunting challenges, school nutrition professionals have ensured student access to healthy school meals since the pandemic began in March 2020. Through the provision of federal waivers, school breakfast, lunch, summer meals and afterschool snacks and suppers have offered a lifeline for families struggling with economic uncertainty, as well as the challenges of balancing work and distance learning. **School meals will be critical to our nation's recovery in the year ahead.**

The complete text of the *Paper* appears on page 4, but let's dig into each of the **four** key priorities that will define our advocacy work. Note that numerous fact sheets and additional resources in support of the *Position Paper* are available *online*.

SNA calls on Congress to **permanently expand the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs (NSLP/SBP) to offer all students meals at no charge as an integral part of the education experience.** *Universal meals will provide all students with equal access, eliminating any stigma or barriers to participation.* Nutritious school meals are proven to support learning, boost test scores, improve attendance and classroom behavior and contribute to overall health and wellness. Research also shows how school lunches support obesity prevention; children receiving these meals consume fewer empty calories and more milk, fruit, vegetables and fiber than their peers. Providing all students with equal access to healthy school meals as part of their educational experience will ensure that *every* child is nourished and ready to learn.

*Universal meals also will ensure that no child goes hungry during the school day and ensure that children do not accrue unpaid meal debt, a burden on both families and school district budgets.* Since the pandemic, more than 4 in 10 children live in households that struggle to meet expenses. Food insecurity is linked to negative health, development and educational





## 2021 Position Paper

School nutrition professionals mobilized immediately when the [pandemic](#) closed school doors nationwide, and despite challenges, they continue to ensure student access to healthy school meals. Through the extension of [federal waivers](#), school breakfast, lunch, summer meals and afterschool meals have offered a lifeline for families struggling with economic uncertainty or the challenges of balancing work and distance learning. These programs, [proven](#) to fuel student success and combat child hunger and obesity, will be critical to our nation's recovery. *To support the health and achievement of America's students and ensure the financial sustainability of school meal programs, the non-profit School Nutrition Association (SNA) calls on Congress to:*

**Permanently expand the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs to offer all students meals at no charge as an integral part of the educational experience. Universal meals will:**

- Provide all students equal access to school breakfast and lunch and eliminate any stigma or barriers for students to benefit from these meals. Nutritious school meals are [proven](#) to support learning, improve attendance and classroom behavior and contribute to overall health and wellness.
- Ensure no child goes hungry during the school day or accrues [unpaid meal debt](#), a burden on families and school district budgets.
- Eliminate the costly, time-consuming meal application and verification process, and streamline paperwork and reporting requirements. Parents won't have to worry about complicated meal applications, and school nutrition professionals can focus on nourishing students. [Learn more.](#)

**Provide emergency financial relief directly to School Food Authorities (SFAs).** COVID-19 school closures and the higher costs of serving meals during the pandemic have crippled school meal program budgets. A recent SNA [survey](#) revealed extensive financial losses, with a harrowing 62% of school nutrition directors anticipating a loss for School Year 2020/21, and an additional 28% of respondents unsure of what to expect. Meal program losses will cut into education budgets, impeding efforts to meet the needs of students and jeopardizing progress in school nutrition programs. While emergency funds provided in the December 2020 stimulus bill will help offset some of the losses accrued last school year, these funds are insufficient to ensure the financial sustainability of school meal programs moving forward. [Learn more.](#)

**Preserve USDA Foods entitlements and State Administrative Expense (SAE) funds, impacted by COVID-19.** School meal programs depend heavily on USDA Foods to reduce meal costs and offer students a wide range of U.S. grown foods. USDA Foods entitlements and SAE funds are based on school meal participation data. With participation drastically down due to COVID-19 school closures, Congress should direct USDA to utilize Fiscal Year 2019 participation data when calculating future entitlement and SAE fund values. [Learn more.](#)

**Reduce regulatory and administrative burdens.** Overly complex federal regulations divert resources from the mission of serving students. They also impede efforts to quickly and creatively respond to student needs in times of emergency. Congress should direct USDA to implement the recommendations of the congressionally-mandated [Child Nutrition Reporting Burden Analysis Study](#). Preserving flexibility on [whole grain, sodium and milk regulations](#) will continue to ease menu planning and procurement challenges. [Learn more.](#)

## HIGHLIGHTS OF SNA'S 2020 ADVOCACY EFFORTS

### JUNE 2020

- SNA Sends Letter to Secretary Perdue Urging Immediate Extension of COVID-19 Emergency Feeding Waivers Through End of SY2020-21.
- SNA Calls on Members to Take Action Asking Congress to Support Waiver Extensions
- SNA Calls on Members to Take Action to Speak up for Program Funding
- SNA Joins 84 Allied Organizations in Letter to USDA

### JULY 2020

- SNA Sends Letter to Secretary Perdue Requesting USDA Take Swift Action to Guarantee Safe and Reliable Access to Healthy School Meals and Ensure Financial Sustainability of Programs
- SNA Joins 65 Allied Groups on Letter to USDA Requesting Waiver Extensions

outcomes. Recognizing the extensive barriers to access school meals during the pandemic, including both stigma and the complicated meal application process, USDA issued regulatory waivers to allow schools to serve all students free meals in SY2020-21.

In addition, 75% of school districts reported having pre-pandemic unpaid student meal debt, often in budget-busting amounts. Unpaid meal debt is expected to increase in the coming years as a result of current economic challenges. When families are unable to pay for student meals, schools must cut into education funds to cover the debt. And no student should have to worry about going without a school meal or being embarrassed at the point of service with the substitution of an alternate meal.

*Universal school meals will eliminate the costly, time-consuming meal application and verification process, streamlining paperwork and reporting requirements.* Parents won't have to worry about complicated meal applications, and school nutrition professionals can focus their attention on nourishing student customers.

SNA also asks Congress to **provide emergency financial relief directly to school food authorities (SFAs)**. *COVID-19 school closures, changes in learning modes and the overall higher costs of serving meals during the pandemic have combined to cripple school meal program budgets.* SNA research reveals that 62% of school nutrition directors anticipate a financial loss for SY2020-21. Meal program losses will cut into education budgets and also jeopardize progress in school nutrition programs. While emergency funds in the December 2020 stimulus bill will help offset some of the losses, these funds are insufficient to ensure the financial sustainability of school meal programs moving forward.

SFAs receive little more than \$3.50 for school meals—an amount that falls short in covering all food, labor and other expenses associated with assembling the meal. To break even, most operations rely on additional revenues from a la carte sales and catering programs, both of which have been severely impacted by school closures, virtual learning options and various safety protocols. In addition, many districts have experienced precipitous drops in participation in the meal program, among both remote and in-person scholars, despite the regulatory waivers that removed certain barriers to access and allowed all students to receive meals at no charge. Meanwhile, food and labor costs have spiked, with the additional financial strain of expenses for foodservice packaging and for personal protective equipment and cleaning.

Losses will cut into education budgets (limiting funds for teachers, textbooks, technology and other resources to support learning). *Many SFAs will also struggle to sustain menu enhancements, fresh, locally grown options and expanded services, programs and initiatives.*

## HIGHLIGHTS OF SNA'S 2020 ADVOCACY EFFORTS

### AUGUST 2020

- SNA Joins 1,315 Allied Groups in Letter Regarding Waiver Extensions
- SNA Hosts Call with USDA Deputy Undersecretary to Discuss Dire Financial Status of School Meal Programs and Request Extension of Waivers and Allowing Schools to Continue to Serve Meals Via Summer Meals Program

### SEPTEMBER 2020

- SNA Joins Nearly 1,400 Allied Groups on Letter Regarding Extension of USDA Waivers Throughout SY2020-21
- SNA Member Addresses House Subcommittee on "America's Child Hunger Crisis: Examining the Urgent Need for Federal Action"

### OCTOBER 2020

- SNA Releases Back to School 2020 Survey Highlighting New Data Regarding Financial Toll of COVID-19 on School Meal Programs
- SNA Advocates for Passage of Heroes Act 2.0

SNA also requests that Congress **preserve USDA Foods entitlements and State Administrative Expense (SAE) funds impacted by COVID-19**. USDA Foods entitlements and SAE funds are based on school meal participation data. Given drastic participation losses over the past year, SNA asks Congress to direct USDA to use FY2019 participation data in its calculations.

School nutrition operations have been granted the opportunity to serve meals this year using the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), which is simpler and safer to operate during the pandemic. As a result, *fewer meals have been served through the NSLP during this period, which could threaten a near total loss of future USDA food entitlements and SAE funds if Congress or USDA fails to act*. USDA Foods are critical to the sustainability of school nutrition operations, and they link back to the original mission of the NSLP to support American agriculture and our country's farmers. Similarly, state agencies serve as a critical link between USDA and school district child nutrition programs. A loss of future SAE funds would threaten the ability of states to ensure program compliance, integrity and training opportunities.

Finally, SNA continues its longstanding call to Congress and USDA to **reduce regulatory and administrative burdens**. Overly complex federal regulations divert resources from the mission of serving students. They impede efforts to quickly and creatively respond to student needs in times of emergency. SNA asks Congress to direct USDA to implement the recommendations of the congressionally mandated Child Nutrition Reporting Burden Analysis Study. A key aspect of addressing these burdens is *preserving current flexibility in whole-grain, sodium and milk regulations to continue to ease menu-planning and procurement challenges and reduce waste*.

## A Novel LAC

The *Position Paper* is the heart of each LAC, driving much of the agenda in order to equip attendees with everything they need to know to be effective advocates when meeting with members of Congress and their staffs. The virtual nature of this year's event adds a certain novelty, but it doesn't change LAC's underlying mission.

The theme of #LAC21 speaks volumes about its goal—and its opportunity for attendees to influence lasting change from coast to coast: "The Power of One, The Impact of Many." Without the time and expense of travel to contend with,





## 6 INSIGHTS FROM DAN GLICKMAN

SNA's 49th Legislative Action Conference (LAC) will kick off on Monday, March 8, with a bipartisan conversation featuring former White House Chiefs of Staff Andrew Card, Jr., and Leon Panetta, moderated by former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture **Dan Glickman**. Here, the former Secretary previews that event by graciously reflecting on *School Nutrition's* questions regarding the political landscape that SNA members will encounter when "Zooming" Capitol Hill during LAC and beyond.

### ***Why is bipartisanship and compromise so important in government—both in Congress and the Administration?***

Nothing of any consequence can be accomplished in government—in Congress or the Executive Branch—without people of both parties working together to reach agreement and consensus. Almost every piece of transformational legislation has been accomplished through Democrats and Republicans working across party lines. This does not mean total unanimity between the parties, nor does it mean the end to partisanship. It does mean that on important issues, we must work toward "constructive partisanship," always keeping the broad interests of the country in mind.

### ***After years of increased polarization and partisanship, is it overly optimistic for Americans to expect that we might see more bipartisan cooperation in this Congress?***

Will we see more bipartisan cooperation in this Congress? We all hope so. The Biden Administration is likely to work more closely with Congress. The new President served in Congress for over 40 years, has close relationships with Members of Congress across the aisle and knows that nothing gets done without the Article One and Article Two branches working together. We also have a nearly evenly split House and Senate, and while Democrats have slim majorities in both chambers, those majorities are, indeed, very slim. Bipartisan cooperation is a necessary condition to get things done, especially to defeat COVID and build back the economy.

### ***As you know, child nutrition is one issue that both sides of the aisle historically supported in Congress. That has been less and less the case in the last decade. What's your prediction in the years ahead?***

Child nutrition issues will, in my judgment, continue to be bipartisan. They are one of the few areas where rural and urban folks, and Republicans and Democrats, work together. We have a long history of bipartisan champions in nutrition areas. Statesmen like Senators Bob Dole and George McGovern set the example early on for bipartisan cooperation on SNAP, school meals, WIC and many other adult and child nutrition programs. Fortunately, many champions of these programs are in leadership positions in the House, the Senate, in the White House and in state houses across the country.

This does not mean we will be without challenges, especially in providing adequate funding, but I am confident that there is great public support for feeding programs, particularly in times of economic adversity.

### ***What can SNA and its members do to develop strong support for its issues with members of both parties?***

SNA members are critical in advocating support for these programs across the aisle. In addition to advocating their positions in Washington, we must continue to build support at the local and state levels. Governors are particularly critical in making the case at the state level.

SNA members should make a conscious effort to meet their Members of Congress, and especially with their staffs, and maintain these connections. SNA should also invite staff and Members to visit schools to see how the programs actually work on the ground. As a former school board member, as well as a Member of Congress, my personal visits to local schools made a big difference in solidifying my support for the school meals programs.

### ***You'll be asking Mr. Card and Mr. Panetta about some of the challenges they faced in partisan politics over their years of service. How do you think their experiences—and your own—will help guide SNA members in advocating for the school nutrition priorities?***

Both Leon Panetta and Andy Card were excellent chiefs of staff, and first-class politicians. They know the power of presidential persuasion, as well as what works in maintaining relationships with Congress. They experienced just about every conceivable challenge a president could face and know how to get things done.

### ***Why is this virtual LAC a don't-miss event?***

There is no issue more important to our country's national security than the health of our people, especially our kids. The relationship between food, health, nutrition and medicine has never been more urgent. The incidence of certain chronic diseases is directly tied to our diet, and this conference will allow further attention to the importance of nutrition, diet, health care and federal feeding programs. LAC can have a powerful influence on federal policy in the next few years.

## HIGHLIGHTS OF SNA'S 2020 ADVOCACY EFFORTS

### DECEMBER 2020

- SNA Drafts 2021 Position Paper Reflecting SNA and Congressional Activities Since March

*Cathy Schuchart is SNA's Staff Vice President of Government Affairs and Media Relations.*

attendee turnout can reach historic highs and, indeed, it *should*. The unprecedented consequences of the pandemic on school meal programs raise the urgency for participation by *every SNA member* in grassroots advocacy. #LAC21 is your conduit to effectively sharing your vision, passion and personal expertise with lawmakers. Check out the agenda highlights you can expect in the box below.

## Advancing a Legacy of Success

Development and the start of a rollout distribution of vaccines to protect against COVID-19 offer genuine hope and optimism for the future. But there will be no quick fixes to the damage the pandemic has wreaked. SNA is ever-vigilant to support the priorities of SNA members in their efforts to serve American families. But the hallmark of our past success is found in our grassroots approach, which means *your* involvement. SNA members, industry partners and allies with overlapping missions are all needed to step up and speak out.

This is the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of both SNA and the NSLP, and that milestone is a tribute to the enduring legacy of school nutrition. Working together, we can assure the continuity of that legacy in a bright future for America's children. **SN**

## #LAC21 PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- LAC's keynote is a conversation between former White House Chiefs of Staff Andrew Card, Jr., and Leon Panetta, who served in the George W. Bush and Clinton Administrations (respectively). Sharing their experiences in working through the challenges of partisan division in government, they will—with the help of moderator Dan Glickman, former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture offer insights on the political landscape that SNA members will encounter in 2021. Secretary Glickman shares a preview of this dynamic session with *SN* on page 7.
- Poised to be confirmed as the *new* Secretary of Agriculture, *former* Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack can hit the ground running when it comes to understanding child nutrition issues. But while he assembles his team, longtime USDA officials will return to the LAC stage to share their insights on upcoming research, USDA Foods, Team Nutrition activities, Farm to School initiatives and plans to address the challenges presented by COVID-19. We certainly look forward to finding out more about what the recent Executive Order strengthening Buy American requirements might mean to school meal programs.
- A report from SNA's ad hoc "Operation: USDA Foods" Task Force will be presented, revealing critical challenges and potential opportunities for use of USDA Foods entitlements. These will include solutions and recommendations for USDA and Congress to consider and act on.
- With a new Administration and Congress officially in place, reauthorization of child nutrition programs is expected to be a major focus by both the House and Senate in 2021. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in December. SNA has created a task force to review various sections of HHFKA, identifying what's working and areas for improvement with a goal of making recommendations for a future CNR bill. The Task Force will be composed of 25 members working in five subcommittees, and will be introduced at LAC.
- A panel of school nutrition directors, state agency staff and industry representatives will share valuable lessons learned over the last year. Discover the successful strategies that may go forward even after the end of this health emergency.
- #LAC21 will also provide time and a format for state delegations to meet and discuss strategy for successfully "Zooming" Capitol Hill. SNA has assembled tips for helping members to navigate the unique nature of virtual meetings with legislators and their staff.

Registration is open at [www.schoolnutrition.org/lac](http://www.schoolnutrition.org/lac). Note that Early Bird discounts end on February 5.

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