*****2023 Position Paper***

**Talking Points**

Research shows students eat their healthiest meals at school; these meals support learning and combat child hunger. We’re asking Congress to address economic and regulatory challenges that threaten the sustainability of school meal programs in our community and nationwide.

**Make permanent the reimbursement rate increases provided in the bipartisan Keep Kids Fed Act:**

* Inflation, supply chain disruptions and labor shortages have squeezed school meal program budgets. Increasing costs are a challenge for our programs.
	+ *Share specific examples of cost increases for your program (e.g. $ increase in key items, labor costs, etc.)*
* These financial pressures show no signs of easing.
* Meal programs are expected to be self-sustaining, covering costs with federal reimbursements and cafeteria sales.
* We can’t afford to lose the additional reimbursements Congress provided this school year. The extra 40 cents per lunch & 15 cents per breakfast expire June 30.
* School meal program losses will cut into education budgets, limiting funds for learning, and jeopardize our ongoing efforts to improve meal service for students.
* ***Refer to*** [***Reimbursement Rate Fact Sheet***](https://schoolnutrition.org/resource/2023-position-paper-reimbursement-rate/) ***for more information.***

**Offer healthy school meals for all students at no charge:**

* Giving students equal access to free school meals ensured *every* student was nourished and ready to learn.
* School districts that must now charge for meals have seen increases in unpaid meal debt – a burden on families and school district budgets.
	+ Many families that don’t qualify for free school meals are still struggling to make ends meet.
	+ Application forms only collect income data and don’t account for expenses like medical bills or rent increases.
* Permanently providing equal access to nutritious school meals at no charge will support academic achievement and foster healthy eating habits for all students.
* Many students are now going without healthy school meals. Schools that charge for meals have seen a drop in meal participation and an increase in stigma for low-income students who depend on these meals.
	+ *Share stories about struggling families/food insecurity in your district and/or challenges with unpaid meal charges, FRP app collection, participation drop.*
* No child should go hungry during the school day.
* We support any effort to expand access to free school meals.
* *If asked about the cost of universal:*
	+ The Congressional Budget Office has not provided a cost estimate, but ensuring America’s children are nourished and ready to learn is invaluable.
* ***Refer to*** [***Meals for All Fact Sheet***](https://schoolnutrition.org/resource/2023-position-paper-meals-for-all-fact-sheet/) ***for more information.***

**Ensure USDA maintains current nutrition standards, rather than implements additional, unachievable rules:**

* Research shows children eat their healthiest meals at school, since school meals offer fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein and low-fat milk.
* We significantly cut calories, fat and sodium in meals to meet *current* standards.
* Persistent labor shortages and supply chain issues have limited the availability of highly specialized K-12 menu options and our capacity to meet any additional nutrition rules.
	+ *Share examples of product & labor shortages for your program.*
* We also know that some food-insecure children will choose not to eat at all if the meal is not familiar or appetizing to them.
	+ *Share examples from your program, e.g. how sodium limits will impact culturally relevant menu options, concerns about students choosing less healthy foods.*
* To keep students eating healthy school meals, USDA & Congress should help us maintain current standards.
* ***Refer to*** [***Nutrition Standards Fact Sheet***](https://schoolnutrition.org/resource/2023-position-paper-nutrition-standards-fact-sheet/) ***for more information.***

**Regulatory burdens:**

* Unnecessary administrative burdens divert resources from our mission of serving students.
* Overly complex federal regulations hamper efforts to quickly respond to student needs, particularly in times of emergency.
	+ *Provide examples of time lost to paperwork.*
* USDA should streamline regulatory burdens on child nutrition programs by implementing recommendations from the congressionally-mandated [Child Nutrition Reporting Burden Analysis Study](https://www.fns.usda.gov/child-nutrition-reporting-burden-analysis-study) and the forthcoming [USDA Foods study](https://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/5_News_and_Publications/5_Newsletters/Tuesday_Morning/Stabenow-Boozman-Letter-to-GAO-USDA%20Foods-10212021.pdf).
* ***Refer to*** [***Regulatory Burden Fact Sheet***](https://schoolnutrition.org/resource/2023-position-paper-regulatory-burdens-fact-sheet/) ***for more information.***