



## THREE MEALS A DAY: A WIN-WIN-WIN

A Guide to Starting and Improving Your Afterschool Meals Program

FULL REPORT

## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Share Our Strength and the School Nutrition Foundation partnered to learn from school nutrition directors who had implemented the Child and Adult Care Food Program's At-Risk Afterschool Meals Program in their districts. The information, tips, and ideas in this guide are based on interviews conducted with ten school nutrition directors from across the country. Each of these directors represented different district characteristics, and each had a unique perspective and path to participating in the program.

We would like to thank these school nutrition directors for sharing their time and insights:

Donna Carver, MEd, SNS, School Nutrition Director, Floyd County Public Schools, Georgia

Annette Hendrickx Derouin, MPH, RD, SNS, Director of Food and Nutrition Services, Willmar Public Schools, Minnesota

Sharon Glosson, MS, RDN, LD, SNS, Executive Director of School Nutrition Services, North East ISD, Texas

Lisa Johnson, MS, RD, SNS, Director of Nutrition Services, Highline Public Schools, Washington

Mary Kurkowski, Food and Nutrition Director, Port Huron Schools, Michigan

Robert Lewis, PhD, SNS, Director of Nutrition Services, El Monte City School District, California

Donna S. Martin, EdS, RDN, LD, SNS, FAND, School Nutrition Program Director, Burke County Public Schools, Georgia

Grace Maschinski, Food Service Director at Aramark, William Floyd Union Free School District, New York

Helen Phillips, SNS, Senior Director of School Nutrition, Norfolk Public Schools, Virginia

Carolyn Thomas, MBA, SNS, Food Service Consultant, Macomb Intermediate School District, Michigan

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# Three Meals a Day: A Win-Win-Win

## A Guide to Starting and Improving Your Afterschool Meals Program

“Really, it’s a win-win-win: for the schools,  
for food and nutrition services, and for the kids.”

Helen Philips, Virginia

### SECTION 1: HOW AFTERSCHOOL MEALS CAN HELP YOUR DISTRICT

School nutrition directors know that they have to be savvy business operators to run a viable program. But at the heart of the matter, kids need nourishment every day. The Child and Adult Care Food Program’s At-Risk Afterschool Meals Program can allow you to do both better than ever.

#### THE NEED



1 in 5 kids in America lives in a household without consistent access to enough food. **That’s 15 million children.**

92%

of children from low-income families eat some food after school and before dinner. Usually it’s not all that healthy and often includes chips, cookies, or candy.<sup>1</sup>

87%

of low-income families purchase food for their children to eat after school instead of getting meals or snacks from their child’s school or afterschool program.<sup>1</sup>

\$400

is the median amount of money that low-income families spend per year on food for their children to eat after school. The average is over \$700 per year.<sup>1</sup>

59%

of low-income families say that it’s hard to provide food for their children to eat after school.<sup>1</sup>

25%

of low-income families worry that their children don’t have enough to eat between lunch and breakfast the following day.<sup>1</sup>

“You know that you’re making a difference. When we first started, the [afterschool program] director had said that the behavior, especially among teens, was better. **When they’re not hungry, they don’t fight as much.**”

Donna Carver, Georgia

“**It’s the right thing to do for kids -- they should have a healthy supper. Snack isn’t enough calories to help anyone get through afternoon. If both parents have to work, the kids are on campus until 5 or 5:30.**”

Robert Lewis, California

<sup>1</sup> No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices in partnership with APCO Insights (2014). “National Afterschool Meals Program Survey Findings.” <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/afterschool/afterschool-meals-survey-findings>.

## OVERVIEW OF THE AFTERSCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) is a federal entitlement program that provides funding to help offset the cost of providing healthy meals and snacks to infants, children, teens, and adults in a variety of care settings, including afterschool programs. Although free snacks have been available through the CACFP and National School Lunch Program (NSLP) for over twenty years, it was not until 2010 that educational or enrichment programs in low-income areas across the country became eligible to serve meals (usually suppers) free of charge through the CACFP. This is formally known as the CACFP's At-Risk Afterschool Meals component but will be referred to as the Afterschool Meals Program throughout this guide. This resource guide will focus on how schools can take advantage of the opportunity to serve meals through the Afterschool Meals Program rather than just snacks through the CACFP or NSLP.

### Program Administration

The CACFP Afterschool Meals Program is administered at the federal level by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and in each state and territory by a designated state agency. The state agency is typically the Department of Education, but in some states, it is the Department of Health, Agriculture, or Social Services. The CACFP state agency is in the same agency as the NSLP in all but 13 states, but even when the programs are in the same agency, a separate team usually oversees the CACFP.

The CACFP state agency works directly with participating institutions, which may be independent centers or sponsors. Independent centers operate a single program location. A sponsor administers the program at multiple locations, known as facilities.



Under a sponsoring organization, there are two possible facility types:

- **Affiliated facilities** are part of the same legal entity as the sponsor. A school food authority administering the program at schools within the district is a sponsor of affiliated facilities.
- **Unaffiliated facilities** do not share the sponsor's legal or tax identity. A school food authority administering the program at locations in the community, like libraries or recreation centers, is a sponsor of unaffiliated facilities.

A school food authority could sponsor either affiliated or unaffiliated facilities, or both.

A non-profit organization could sponsor the Afterschool Meals Program at a school in lieu of its school food authority. The unaffiliated sponsor could manage the program entirely, or it could provide administrative services only while the school or school food authority provides the meals. The school food authority may act as a contracted vendor for the sponsor, providing meals at a fixed per-meal rate, or the sponsor could pass through the reimbursement, less its fee, to offset the school's foodservice costs.

## Program Eligibility Requirements

Each participating school or community location must:

- Offer educational or enrichment programming in a structured and supervised environment.

A wide variety of activities qualify, from tutoring to band and chess club to mentoring and life skills education. The Afterschool Meals Program may not operate for the sole benefit of competitive sports teams, but athletes may receive meals as part of a broader afterschool program that offers activities for other students. Schools can partner with other organizations to provide the activities.

- Offer meals free of charge, although they may charge a reasonable fee for the activity.
- Be within the attendance boundary of an elementary, middle, or high school where at least 50% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

For schools taking advantage of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), a school is eligible (or confers eligibility on other locations within its attendance boundary) if the identified student percentage (ISP) multiplied by 1.6 is 50% or higher. Although CEP allows for averages across groupings of schools, this cannot be done to determine Afterschool Meals Program eligibility.

Additional details on these requirements can be found in the USDA Afterschool Meals handbook ([www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/atriskhandbook.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/atriskhandbook.pdf)).

## CURRENT REACH

The number of suppers served through the Afterschool Meals Program has more than quadrupled in the first five years that the option has been available nationwide. However, a large gap remains: **There are less than four afterschool suppers served for every hundred school lunches going to kids in need across the country.**<sup>2</sup> In some states, implementation of the Afterschool Meals Program through CACFP is so low that there are just one or two suppers served for every thousand free or reduced-price lunches.

Possible reasons for this gap include:

- Lack of awareness of the program;
- Difficulty identifying existing afterschool programs and pairing them with sponsors or vendors;
- Belief that hunger doesn't exist within the community, so an afterschool meal is too much food and may cause obesity;
- Misconception that the program is only for children in formal, enrolled activities;
- Perception that it is too difficult to apply or more work than it's worth; and
- Transportation challenges.



<sup>2</sup> No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices (2016). "To Meet Need, Growth in Afterschool Snacks and Meals Must Continue: A Report on History and Trends." [https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/resources/afterschool\\_snacks\\_meals\\_history\\_and\\_trends.pdf](https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/resources/afterschool_snacks_meals_history_and_trends.pdf).

## THE OPPORTUNITY

There is a lot of flexibility to implement the Afterschool Meals Program in a way that works for your district and the schools and programs you serve. A well-structured program yields numerous benefits for the schools and afterschool programs, your foodservice program, and most importantly, the children reached.

- For schools and afterschool programs: increased interest in tutoring and other programs.
- For children: better focus and improved performance.
- For your foodservice program:
  - Increased participation at breakfast and lunch due to the relationship-building that occurs in the smaller setting after school.
  - Opportunity to test new menu items and get feedback from a smaller group.
  - Additional revenue.

The reimbursement rate for a supper is more than three and a half times the reimbursement for a snack. All meals are reimbursed at the free rate, regardless of individual children's eligibility status. Children do not even have to be enrolled students at the school, much less formally enrolled in any afterschool activity.

Schools that have implemented the Afterschool Meals Program report that the reimbursements cover basic costs. Sometimes, there are enough funds to pay for additional equipment purchases. Directors are able to give extra hours or overtime desired by employees, and in some cases, even create additional positions.

The tips and ideas in the following sections draw on the experience of the ten school nutrition directors interviewed for this project.

**“The afterschool enrichment coordinator was hoping for 30 kids in the tutoring program, but **with the meal and word-of-mouth promotion, there are now 150 kids participating in the meal.**”**

Annette Derouin, Minnesota

**“This is an essential program in our district. The kids are willing to stay after school for tutoring because of the hot meal. The graduation rate has increased, and the athletes are gaining weight and muscle and performing better.”**

Donna Martin, Georgia

**“The smaller group at dinner helps the students get to know the staff...The high school kitchen manager said that kids who got to know her at dinner call her grandma now, and **they come in for lunch, when they never did before.**”**

Helen Philips, Virginia



## SECTION 2: LAY THE GROUNDWORK

### LEARN THE BASICS

- **Call your state agency** to learn about the training and application process in your state. The NSLP staff should be able to point you to the person who handles the Afterschool Meals Program specifically or all new applicants for the CACFP.
- **Understand the requirements.** The USDA Afterschool Meals handbook ([www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/atriskhandbook.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/atriskhandbook.pdf)) is an easy-to-read guide to the Afterschool Meals Program.
- **Contact another district**, ideally within your state, to learn how they implemented the program.

### ASSESS THE NEED AND INTEREST IN SCHOOLS ACROSS THE DISTRICT

- **Consider the free or reduced-price meal eligibility percentage and current snack participation**, if applicable. Even if the district's average free or reduced-price eligibility is under 50 percent, there may be several high-need schools where many students would benefit from the meal. An individual school under the 50 percent free or reduced-price threshold may still be a great candidate as well, especially if there's a robust afterschool enrichment program. A school is eligible as long as it is within the attendance boundary of a school that meets the 50 percent threshold.
- **Survey schools to learn what afterschool activities are already happening** and get a sense of their daily and annual schedules as well as the number of kids they typically serve. This can include both school-sponsored activities as well as third-party or independent programs that operate in the school building. As afterschool programming providers, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center grantees are great partners.
- **Assess the schools' ability to offer additional low-barrier activities** like tutoring or recreational sports that may draw more students to stay for the meal. Having a drop-in activity available to all may also help to build support for an actively promoted, open-to-all meal program. Teacher contracts or unions may limit teachers' ability to stay for afterschool programming, but volunteer groups or outside organizations may be able to do this.
- **Investigate transportation options.** A school with many walkers or bikers who can decide when to leave could have higher participation. It could be difficult to change bus schedules, especially mid-year, but the departure time for regular or later "activity" buses could be pushed back. Enhancing the logistics of loading buses could also provide enough time for a meal served right after the bell.

**"It's been wonderful. Even in a district that's 45 percent free or reduced-price eligible, there are still kids who need this after school."**

Sharon Glosson, Texas

**"It was nice to work with schools where something is already happening [after school]. Since we got our foot in the door with one program operating at multiple schools, it was easy."**

Lisa Johnson, Washington

## ASSESS INTERNAL FACTORS

Take into account circumstances like:

- The current staffing model and bandwidth to handle additional work,
- The minimum wage in your area,
- The cost of benefits for new employees or employees moving from part-time to full-time,
- Overtime costs,
- Union restrictions,
- Procurement and bidding processes,
- Current kitchen equipment availability and usage, and
- Storage capacity of individual facilities and/or central kitchens.

Different preparation or staffing models may work for you based on these circumstances. Grants can help overcome start-up costs, like additional milk coolers.<sup>3</sup> The meal reimbursements from the Afterschool Meals Program may cover the cost of gradual expansion or improvements to equipment.

## ENGAGE KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Partnerships are key to having optimal implementation and the highest possible participation. The school nutrition directors interviewed said that they valued having a variety of people on board, including:

- The superintendent,
- School principals,
- Afterschool activity coordinators,
- Athletic directors and coaches,
- Custodial staff, and
- School nutrition staff.

Unless you're considering Supper in the Classroom, this is a similar but often different set of stakeholders than for Breakfast After the Bell models. Everyone who would be impacted should be involved early in the planning process to build investment and talk through challenges. Naysayers could be connected with successful districts to address their concerns.

**“Check with all of your key stakeholders, especially the principal, custodian, and teachers who are there after school. They need to be informed, and they need to be involved in developing standard operating procedures. You have to be a part of the team before getting started. For long term success it's important to work collaboratively.”**

Robert Lewis, California

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/child-nutrition-program-grant-opportunities> for information on funding opportunities.

## SECTION 3: PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTATION IN YOUR DISTRICT

**“Make sure systems are in place. Without pre-planning, you could set yourself up for failure. You need to **have the planning piece and then roll with it, making changes as needed.**”**

Carolyn Thomas, Michigan

### SPONSORSHIP OPTIONS

- **Sponsor schools within your school food authority.**

Keeping operation of the program within the district likely requires the fewest logistical considerations and partnerships since most if not all stakeholders are under the same leadership.

- **Sponsor both schools and community sites.**

Serving additional meals at community sites could help you to reach financial viability or save for equipment upgrades by spreading out labor and overhead costs over more meals. This could be especially helpful if community-based organizations like the YMCA or Boys and Girls Clubs have more robust afterschool programs than the schools.

- **Enter into an agreement with an outside sponsor who handles the administration.**

The sponsor is responsible for the administration and oversight of the Afterschool Meals Program. You could either receive part of the meal reimbursement (at least 85 percent) in exchange for providing meals, or contract with the sponsor to provide meals at a fixed per-meal rate.

The sponsor could be an experienced CACFP sponsoring organization. Or, an afterschool program that operates at one or more schools, like a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center grantee, could take on the role.

### MENU APPROACH

- **Meal pattern.**

- Schools have the option to follow either the NSLP or CACFP meal pattern. While many consider the CACFP meal pattern to be easier and more flexible, some school nutrition directors prefer to use the NSLP meal pattern all the time to reduce confusion for staff members who plan or prepare both lunch and supper.
- Schools also have the option to implement Offer Versus Serve (OVS). This can provide flexibility to students and reduce food waste. However, this is more complex to implement.

- **Unitized or bulk meals.**

- The school nutrition directors interviewed were fairly split on favoring unitized or bagged/boxed meals versus a serving line.
- A few school nutrition directors did both, depending on the school or the day of the week. Some offered unitized meals for field trips.

- **Cold or hot meals.**
  - Some of the school nutrition directors interviewed indicated that there was more interest with hot meals over all-cold meals.
  - Other school nutrition directors indicated that constraints like high labor costs or reliance on afterschool program staff to distribute meals necessitated all-cold meals.
  - Cold meals are typically easier to prepare earlier in the day and hold until service time. This can also provide more flexibility for a long serving time, multiple shifts, or a variety of serving locations.
    - A cold “super snack” is a good option for schools where the need or interest is lower, or it is not feasible to serve hot meals.
    - A “super snack” meets the supper meal pattern requirements, so it is eligible for the full supper reimbursement, but it includes minimum portion sizes of snack-like items for each component. As an example, this could be a string cheese stick, hummus, baby carrots, grapes, pita chips, and milk.
  - Offering hot meals Monday through Thursday and a cold meal on Friday can provide the variety and interest associated with hot meals while minimizing the potential waste when Friday participation is lower or less predictable.
- **Menu options.**
  - Few of the school nutrition directors interviewed provide multiple food options for the afterschool meal. It was more common to offer a choice of fruits and vegetables than an entrée choice.
  - Leftovers from lunch can be used to increase the variety of options at supper. Some school nutrition directors indicated that students preferred to eat their favorite item at lunch and supper, so they wanted that option.
  - Leftovers from supper can be offered on the line the next day at lunch to minimize waste.

## MEAL PREPARATION CONSIDERATIONS

- **Meal preparation location.**
  - Based on the current model for preparing breakfast and lunch as well as the available infrastructure, meals could be prepared at a central location or on-site at each participating school.
  - Depending on the size of the program at each school, it could be more efficient to have staff at one location prepare all of the meals and deliver them to each school. A single staff member could deliver meals to each location for distribution by volunteers or afterschool program staff, or the school nutrition staff could bring meals to a school and then stay to serve them.
  - Arranging for milk deliveries directly to each participating location may be an option that reduces the work of counting and delivering milk from the central kitchen.

- **Storage space and equipment.**
  - Regardless of the menu approach selected, more storage space will be needed; exactly how much depends on expected participation.
  - More frequent milk deliveries or direct deliveries to each participating location can mitigate the need for additional milk coolers.
  - Additional hotel pans and other cooking equipment may be needed if supper preparation starts before lunch service has ended.
- **Staffing levels.**
  - The staff time required can vary dramatically based on your program's goals and expected participation. It can be very low depending on the menu approach. Maximizing efficiencies with lunch preparation and centralized production could also reduce the staff time needed.
  - Three school nutrition directors said that when preparation is split among employees, the supper requires 30 minutes or less of labor. Two of those districts, and some schools within the third, have not had to add any hours to employees' days.
  - Most of the school nutrition directors interviewed needed additional staff time to operate the program, and most preferred to give additional hours or overtime pay to existing employees rather than hire and provide benefits for new employees. However, a few said that revenue from the program allowed them to hire new staff or convert staff from part-time to full-time.

## DAILY LOGISTICS

- **Meal distribution.**
  - Relying on volunteers or afterschool program staff for meal distribution can be a great option to reduce labor costs. This tends to be most feasible when the meals are cold and/or unitized so that they do not require as much expertise to distribute and count.
  - If schools wish to provide hot meals, the option of OVS, or more menu choices, experienced school nutrition staff may be needed to serve meals. If these options lead to higher participation, the benefits may outweigh the added labor costs.
- **Daily schedule.**
  - Depending on the number of afterschool activities occurring at each school and their schedules, a long meal service or multiple shifts may be needed to maximize participation.
  - For schools relying on school nutrition staff to distribute meals, it is most cost effective to work with the afterschool programs to adjust their activity schedules so that students have time for the meal soon after the final bell. However, some districts have a separate staff member prepare and serve supper, which provides more flexibility on serving time.



- **Record keeping.**
  - Discussing planned procedures with the state agency in advance is strongly recommended.
  - USDA guidance, including the handbook, specify that although dated, daily attendance is a required record, there is no requirement to have enrollment records or track the activity in which children participate, if any. In fact, the USDA explicitly states that children do not have to participate in any offered activity in order to receive a meal. The attendance does need to reflect all students who receive a meal, though, not just activity participants.
  - There are a variety of different systems that can work for taking attendance and meal counts: some use electronic point-of-sale systems while others use paper sign-in sheets or rosters along with meal check-off sheets.
    - An electronic system, like a PIN number or swipe card system, could be an efficient way to collect and calculate attendance as long as there is a way to also record the meal count. Drop-in programs open to non-students may not be able to use an electronic system if they do not allow non-enrolled children to be entered.
    - One school issues each student a poker chip after signing in; kids use the poker chip to get the meal, and then the school uses the chip count for the meal count.
  - Many school nutrition directors rely on afterschool program staff to take attendance and meal counts. However, some found that it is too difficult to rely on them to complete the records consistently and accurately. Since poor record keeping jeopardizes reimbursements, those directors have their own school nutrition staff maintain the records.
  - If the school nutrition staff does not have the capacity to handle the additional record keeping, filing, and claim preparation, seeking out a sponsor could be a viable option.

## STARTING OUT

- **Pilot phase.**

Especially if stakeholders are skeptical, a finite pilot period can help you to build a case for the program while developing the implementation plan.

- **Roll-out.**

Several school nutrition directors reported that rolling out the program school by school over several weeks or months was useful to assess interest, improve logistics, and test menu items. Others who started at all eligible schools at once wished they had gone slower.

**“Start with one site to learn how it’s working and fine tune it, especially if that site has an advocate and will give honest feedback. Plus, an advocate will help with promotion later during roll-out so it’s not just coming from the food and nutrition director.”**

Sharon Glosson, Texas

**“Do it! The application is cumbersome, but don’t let it stop you from doing a program that benefits students; think about helping students to be successful.**

**And the second year was a lot easier.”**

Annette Derouin, Minnesota

## SECTION 4: MAKE IT BETTER

### PROMOTE THE PROGRAM

- **Expand** afterschool meals to additional afterschool programs and schools.
  - Attend or present at meetings with principals, afterschool program coordinators, coaches, and athletic directors to make them aware of the program, explain the benefits, and help them to build it into their schedules.
  - Build interest by sharing data about the need as well as success stories from nearby districts or from pilots within your district.
- **Advertise** the meals to students, parents, and the community.
  - Consider making periodic all-school announcements via the public address system to ensure that all students are aware of the program.
  - Utilize the school's or food service program's social media outlets to promote the meal.
  - Post menus and meal times on the school website or send flyers home to inform parents.

### ENHANCE THE PROGRAM

- **Facilitate ongoing communication** between key stakeholders.
  - Have a shared calendar or system for communicating schedule updates.
    - Communication should involve school administrators as well as afterschool program staff and coaches. Common reasons for participation fluctuation that school nutrition directors cited include: early dismissals and half days, intensive periods of test preparation, and transition times in between sports' seasons.
    - Field trips and away games may cause participation to dip, but with advance planning and approval, bagged or boxed meals could be taken off-site.
  - Host regular meetings between afterschool program leaders, administration, and school nutrition staff to continue addressing challenges and needs.

**“Working with different groups, sometimes it’s frustrating for my staff and the afterschool staff [...] so that’s why we meet once a month and keep open lines of communication. It’s gotten a lot better.”**

**Mary Kurkowski, Michigan**

- **Tweak the menu** in response to performance, surveys, and taste tests.
  - One school nutrition director asked the students what they wanted to eat after school, and students said that they liked the food at Starbucks. After looking at the various snack pack options there, the schools began offering bento box suppers: snack items for each meal component, packaged in an appealing orange container with a clear lid.
  - Another school nutrition director discovered that entrée salads took students too long to eat when they were trying to rush off to their activities, so those were taken off the supper menu.

- **Have shelf-stable meal options** available to deal with unexpected participation, or hedge when a program coordinator requests for large number of meals for a new program.
- **Consider innovative serving models** to boost participation.
  - **The Umbrella Model:** Under the “umbrella” of afterschool programming that includes a variety of activities available to the student body, the availability of the afterschool meal can be actively promoted to all students. In pilot tests conducted by Share Our Strength, schools that implemented the Umbrella Model and advertised the afterschool meal increased participation by a median of 53% over historic participation levels.
  - **Supper in the Classroom:** Just like breakfast, supper can be served or eaten in the classroom. This can be easier for elementary school students who may have less control over their afterschool hours. In schools that tested this model for Share Our Strength, participation skyrocketed to higher levels than lunch.

“School nutrition professionals are understanding that they are **the community-based champions for the children.**

It’s not a question of ‘will it work?’ but ‘how can we make it work?’ because the need is there.”

Carolyn Thomas, Michigan

“[Doing this program] gives you a lot of **kudos and recognition within the district** — coaches like you, principals like you. Sometimes the food and nutrition director is not the most-liked or well-regarded person, but by doing supper, you get a lot of capital.”

Donna Martin, Georgia



“It’s absolutely something to look into. It’s a great program, it’s good PR for your program, it’s profitable for your program, it’s good for your kids, whether they’re staying afterschool in your building or somewhere else, and it’s not a lot of additional labor if you form your menus right. If it’s done well and managed well, **it’s a win-win-win all around.**”

Donna Carver, Georgia



#### ABOUT NO KID HUNGRY

No child should go hungry in America, but 1 in 5 kids will face hunger this year. Using proven, practical solutions, No Kid Hungry is ending childhood hunger today by ensuring that kids start the day with a nutritious breakfast and families learn the skills they need to shop and cook on a budget. When we all work together, we can make sure kids get the healthy food they need. No Kid Hungry is a campaign of national anti-hunger organization Share Our Strength. [Join us at NoKidHungry.org](https://www.NoKidHungry.org).



#### ABOUT THE SCHOOL NUTRITION FOUNDATION

As the philanthropic sister organization of the School Nutrition Association, the School Nutrition Foundation is dedicated to securing financial resources for education, professional development, scholarships and research in school nutrition. The School Nutrition Foundation focuses on providing the resources that educate and empower SNA members to provide high-quality, low-cost meals to students across the nation to foster an environment where children achieve overall wellness and lifelong success.