



2024 Position Paper

Talking Points

Research shows students eat their healthiest meals at school; these meals support academic achievement 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.

Permanently increase federal school meal reimbursements by 40 cents/lunch and 15 cents/breakfast:

- Higher food and labor costs are squeezing school meal program budgets.
 - *Share specific examples of cost increases for your program (e.g. \$ increase in key items, labor costs, etc.)*
- Additional funds from Congress and USDA helped our program during the pandemic, but this support is ending, and financial pressures show no signs of easing.
- Congress must increase reimbursements to account for the uniquely high cost of operating K-12 programs and procuring specialty foods.
 - Our programs require more expensive low-sodium and whole grain foods, and given staff shortages, we need to increase wages to compete with local restaurants and other businesses.
- Meal programs are expected to be self-sustaining, covering costs with federal reimbursements and cafeteria sales.
- School meal program losses will cut into education budgets, limiting funds for learning, and jeopardize our ongoing efforts to improve menus.
 - *Share examples of menu improvements (e.g. efforts to serve more fresh, local produce, scratch cooking initiatives, etc.)*
- *If asked about the cost: Based on preliminary Fiscal Year 2023 participation, this proposal would cost approximately \$2.2 billion.*
- **Refer to [Reimbursement Fact Sheet](#) for more information.**

Ensure USDA maintains current, successful nutrition standards, rather than implementing 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 and are constantly working to improve meals for students.
 - *Share specific examples (e.g. reducing sugar, increasing whole grain)*

- In April, USDA will release even more restrictive, long-term school nutrition rules, despite a lack of any nutrition mandates for dining or retail foods.
- USDA's proposed rules don't account for challenges with the cost and availability of highly specialized K-12 menu options and our capacity to meet 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 (e.g. how sodium limits will impact culturally relevant menu options, concerns about students choosing less healthy foods, etc.)*
- To keep students eating healthy school meals, USDA & Congress should help us maintain current standards.
- **Refer to [Nutrition Standards Fact Sheet](#) for more information.**

Offer healthy school meals for all students at no charge:

- We believe *all* students deserve equal access to nutritious meals to help them succeed at school.

If your program must charge for meals:

- Since the end of pandemic waivers that allowed us to serve all our students free meals, we've seen too many students go without.
 - 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.
 - *Share stories about struggling families/food insecurity in your district, challenges with unpaid meal charges, FRP app collection, participation drop, increased stigma for low-income students.*
- Eliminating the free and reduced-price meal application process ensures no child goes hungry at school or feels ashamed to take a healthy meal.

If your program offers free meals to all:

- Our district is fortunate to be able to offer free meals to all our students and we have seen numerous benefits.
 - *Share examples (e.g. reduced stigma for low-income students, more students eating healthy meals, reduced meal debt, gratitude from families, fewer nurse visits, more time for staff to focus on serving students, etc.)*
- Hungry children live in every community across the country and all students deserve equal 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](#) for more information.**