

Support Student Health & Success

PROTECT SCHOOL MEALS!

Underfunded school meal programs need more support from Congress to maintain meal quality, meet nutrition standards and ensure access for students in need.

To ensure students are nourished and ready to learn, Congress must protect the Community Eligibility Provision and address critical challenges:



INCREASE SCHOOL MEAL REIMBURSEMENT RATES

98% of school nutrition directors reported challenges with food costs.



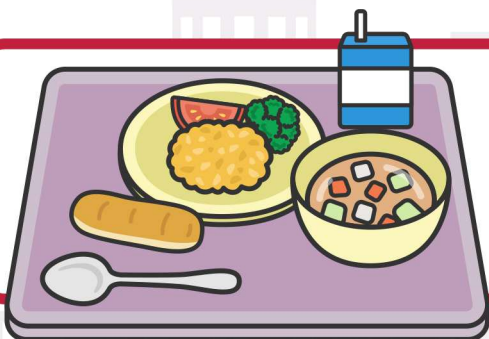
EXPAND ACCESS TO FREE, HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL STUDENTS

74% of districts that charge for meals reported students are going hungry or choosing not to eat



ADDRESS UNPAID MEAL DEBT

97% of districts that charge for meals are challenged by unpaid school meal debt*



For less than the price of a latte, schools must prepare and serve a nutritious lunch, complete with fruits, vegetables and milk.

#PROTECTSCHOOLMEALS

* Data taken from SNA's SY2024/25 School Nutrition Trends Report
Learn more at SchoolNutrition.org/PositionPaper





2025 POSITION PAPER

The National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs (NSLP/SBP) fuel academic achievement, support millions of America's working families burdened by high food prices and inflation, and provide a crucial market for U.S. grown foods. [Research](#) shows school meals are the healthiest meals America's children eat, making these programs a critical asset in chronic disease prevention.

To ensure the financial sustainability of school meal programs, the School Nutrition Association (SNA) urges Congress to:

INCREASE NSLP/SBP REIMBURSEMENT RATES BY 40 CENTS PER LUNCH AND 15 CENTS PER BREAKFAST

School meals must meet calorie, sodium and fat limits and offer students fruits, vegetables, milk and entrees made with lean proteins and whole grains. Healthy meals cost more to prepare – NSLP/SBP funding must cover the added expense of meeting nutrition standards and other complex regulatory requirements.

In a recent [SNA survey](#), virtually all meal program directors cited challenges with the cost of food (97.9%), labor (94.9%) and equipment (91.4%). Only 20.5% reported the [federal reimbursement rate](#) is sufficient to cover the cost of producing a lunch. As a result, 92.1% expressed concern about their program's financial sustainability three years from now.

When asked about resources necessary to comply with [forthcoming limits](#) on added sugar and sodium, 96.8% of directors indicated their programs require increased funding, with 69.5% citing an "extreme need" for more funds. ***Congress must raise reimbursements to help schools cover costs and invest in staff and equipment needed to expand scratch cooking and meet new standards.***

PROTECT COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION (CEP) AND EXPAND ACCESS TO HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL STUDENTS

School meals are a smart investment in the health and future of America's children. These meals are [proven](#) to support obesity prevention, student health and academic achievement by improving children's diets and combatting hunger. In schools that offer free meals to all students through [CEP](#), all children are nourished for success, students face less stigma, and schools have less paperwork and administrative burden.

School districts that must charge for meals confront a wide range of consequences: 89.3% [report](#) challenges with families in need not receiving free or reduced-price meals, and 73.5% cite that students are going hungry or choosing not to eat. ***Congress should ensure every student has access to free, nutritious school meals as part of their education. SNA supports federal and state proposals to advance this goal, including increasing the CEP multiplier, eliminating the reduced-price category and raising the free meal eligibility threshold.***

ADDRESS UNPAID SCHOOL MEAL DEBT

Free and reduced-price meal applications only collect income data, so families burdened by high health care costs, rent increases or emergency expenses often fail to qualify for assistance. When families cannot pay, meal debt rapidly accumulates, forcing many cash-strapped school districts to divert education funds to cover meal program losses.

In SNA's [survey](#), 96.8% of school districts that must charge for meals reported challenges with unpaid meal debt, with over two-thirds citing meal debt as a "significant challenge." Alarming, the amount of debt is climbing. The median reported district debt as of November 2024 was \$6,900, which is 25.6% higher than the year prior and 102.9% higher than the median debt reported at the end of School Year 2017-18. ***Congress must assist schools and families burdened by school meal debt.***