



2025 Position Paper

Talking Points

Research shows students eat their healthiest meals at school; these meals fuel academic achievement and support America's working families. ***We're asking Congress to protect school meal programs from proposed cuts and address financial challenges that threaten their sustainability.***

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

- Healthy meals cost more to prepare, but school meal reimbursement rates fail to cover the added expense of meeting strict nutrition standards and other regulatory requirements.
- Persistently high food and labor costs are straining school meal program budgets.
 - *Share specific examples of cost increases for your program (e.g. \$ or % increase for key items, labor costs, etc.)*
- Congress must increase reimbursements to ensure the financial sustainability of these critical programs and to help schools serve more fresh produce, expand scratch cooking and meet upcoming sodium and sugar limits.
 - *Share examples of financial needs for menu improvements (e.g. need to invest in hiring/training, higher cost of fresh, local produce, etc.)*
- Meal programs are expected to be self-sustaining and cover food, labor and all other costs through federal reimbursements and program sales.
- School meal program losses cut into education budgets, taking away funds for learning.
- *If asked about the cost: Based on preliminary FY 2024 participation, this proposal would cost approximately \$2.3 billion annually.*
- **Refer to [Reimbursement Fact Sheet](#) for more information.**

Protect CEP and expand access to healthy school meals for all students:

- Community Eligibility Provision allows schools in high-poverty areas to offer free school meals to all students without cumbersome applications.
- We adamantly oppose proposed changes to the CEP eligibility threshold, which would cut 24,000 schools, serving 12 million students, from the program.
- CEP ensures every student is nourished and ready to learn and it reduces stigma, paperwork and school lunch debt.
 - *If your program offers free meals to all through CEP or state initiatives, share specific examples of the benefits you've witnessed.*
 - *If your program must charge for meals, share about struggling families/food insecurity in your district, students going without, challenges with FRP app collection, increased stigma for low-income students.*
- We support efforts to expand access to free, nutritious school meals.

- Increasing the CEP multiplier, eliminating the reduced-price category, and raising the free meal eligibility threshold are critical steps in advancing that goal.
- **Refer to [Protect CEP Fact Sheet](#) for more information.**

Address unpaid school meal debt:

- In schools that must charge for meals, unpaid meal debt is a growing problem.
- Many of America's working families don't qualify for free school meals but are still struggling to make ends meet due to high food prices and inflation.
 - A family of four earning more than \$40,560 does not qualify for free meals; those earning even a dollar above \$57,720 are ineligible for any meal assistance.
- Application forms only collect income data and don't account for expenses like medical bills or rent increases.
 - *Share any stories about struggling families who don't qualify for help, challenges with unpaid meal debt, students who choose not to eat due to debt.*
- When families cannot pay, meal debt rapidly accumulates, forcing many cash-strapped school districts to divert education funds to cover meal program losses.
- Congress must assist schools and families burdened by meal debt.
- **Refer to [Meal Debt Fact Sheet](#) for more information.**

Oppose proposed income verification requirements:

- Congress is considering a proposal to require income verification with every free and reduced-price school meal application.
- This proposal would cause eligible children to go without healthy meals and bury school nutrition staff in paperwork, diverting scarce school meal funds to administrative costs.
- We already struggle to manage the cumbersome, inefficient application process.
- Schools simply don't have the staff, software or time to collect, process and verify income paperwork for every single application.
- *If asked about waste/fraud/abuse: Ensuring a student doesn't go hungry during the school day is never wasteful.*
- **Refer to [Proposed Cuts Fact Sheet](#) for more information.**

Protect Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE):

- Students whose families participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) automatically receive free school meals without having to complete an application.
- Congress' proposal to end Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility would force low-income households off SNAP, causing an estimated 1 million at-risk children to lose automatic eligibility for free school meals.
- The proposal would increase paperwork for families and schools and impede access to healthy meals that fuel learning.
- **Refer to [Proposed Cuts Fact Sheet](#) for more information.**