



2026 Position Paper

Fact Sheet

Protect and expand access to healthy school meals for all students

School meals are proven to support academic achievement, reduce absenteeism and improve student attention and behavior in the classroom. As the healthiest meals America's children eat, school meals also provide a critical asset in obesity and chronic disease prevention. **Ensuring students have access to free, nutritious school meals as part of their education is a smart investment in the health and future of our nation's children.**

SNA urges Congress to protect the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows schools in high-poverty areas to offer free school breakfast and lunch to all students without cumbersome applications. CEP cuts through red tape and ensures all children are nourished for success, without stigma.

CEP also eliminates the accumulation of unpaid student lunch debt, a burden for both families and school budgets. Many families whose income exceeds eligibility limits for free or reduced-price meals still struggle to afford the cost of school meals. Federal meal applications only collect income data and do not allow for exceptions, so families saddled with high living or emergency expenses often fail to qualify for assistance.

In School Year 2025-26, a family of four earning more than \$41,795 a year does not qualify for free meals; those earning even a dollar above \$59,478 are ineligible for any assistance and must pay full price for meals.

In addition to supporting students and families, offering free meals to all students was cited in SNA's national survey as bolstering the financial health of school meal programs:

- **Programs offering free meals to all** indicated that reimbursement rates are sufficient to cover the cost of producing a lunch at a rate almost 2.5 times higher than programs that must charge for meals.
- **Meanwhile, programs that must charge for school meals** cited "serious concern" about the financial sustainability of their school nutrition programs three years from now at a significantly higher rate (10 percentage points) than programs offering free meals to all.

Upcoming changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid under HR 1 will cut the number of children automatically certified for free and reduced-price school meals, forcing schools off of CEP. The new law will increase financial pressure on states, threatening state level school meal investments, particularly for the nine states providing free meals for all students.

Congress should provide every student access to free, nutritious school meals to support their health and education. To advance this goal, SNA calls for passage of:

- S 3281 to repeal HR 1's SNAP provisions.
- *Legislation preserving current CEP rules to ensure participating schools can maintain the program. Specifically, legislation should protect the 25% Identified Student Percentage (used to determine eligibility for the program), the 1.6 multiplier (used to determine reimbursements), school grouping rules and Medicaid Direct Certification.*