

## **Celebrating 80 Years of School Meals: Delivering Healthy Futures for America's Children**

**Background:** School meals represent one of Congress' greatest bipartisan achievements. On June 4, 1946, President Harry Truman signed the National School Lunch Act, establishing a permanent federal commitment to child nutrition, national security, and education. Eight decades later, the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs serve nearly 30 million students daily, fueling academic success, promoting life-long healthy eating habits and supporting working families.

**Proven Results:** Research shows school meals are the healthiest meals children consume. The Healthy Hunger Free-Kids Act of 2010 increased access to fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins, while reducing calories, sodium and unhealthy fats. Schools now meet caps on added-sugar with additional sodium and sugar limits taking effect next year. Meanwhile, efforts like the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) have increased access to school meals across the country.

**Current Reality: Rising Costs, Tight Budgets:** According to a School Nutrition Association survey, despite success, school meal programs are under significant financial strain:

- **98%** of school nutrition directors report challenges with **food costs**
- **95%** report challenges with **labor and equipment costs**
- **70%** say the federal reimbursement rate is **insufficient** to cover the cost of producing a school lunch

**What's on the Horizon?** In the coming weeks, USDA is expected to release a proposed rule to align school meal standards with the 2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

School nutrition professionals are eager to do what's best for students and need additional support to expand scratch cooking and successfully implement new standards.

### **What Can Congress Do?**

- Increase investments in school meal programs to cover rising food, labor, and equipment costs, expand scratch cooking where possible, and provide students more fresh and frozen, local products when appropriate
- Protect and expand access to healthy school meals for all students
- Ensure updates to federal school nutrition standards are feasible for schools

### **What Can Senate Appropriators Focus On?**

- Increase the School Nutrition Equipment Grant to \$50 million
- Increase investments in farm to school programs
- Support technical assistance through the Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN)
- Ensure that any rulemaking on school meals is based on sound evidence