



1201 16th Street, NW | Washington, DC 20036 | Phone: (202) 833-4000

Rebecca S. Pringle  
*President*

Princess R. Moss  
*Vice President*

Noel Candelaria  
*Secretary-Treasurer*

Kim A. Anderson  
*Executive Director*

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Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the 3 million members of the National Education Association, who teach, support, and nurture students in 14,000 communities across America, we submit these comments for the record for the committee's hearing on Child Nutrition Reauthorization.

All students, regardless of where they live, family income, ethnicity, race, or other factors, deserve healthy meals that will position them for success. **Our nation should provide healthy school meals to all students at no cost to them.** This would improve their health as well as their classroom performance; eliminate the stigma of student meal debt; and relieve schools of complicated and burdensome paperwork. The pandemic has demonstrated that schools and school food service workers can provide meals to students in all communities, and we must build on this with a robust response to childhood hunger that ensures students have a solid foundation for growth and development.

Given that child nutrition programs help fight hunger, promote health, and prepare students to learn, we believe the following principles should guide Child Nutrition Reauthorization:

- **Maintain Healthy Guidelines for School Meals:** The Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act (HHFK) helps improve student health by upholding science-based nutrition standards for school meals programs. Students who participate in these programs consume breakfasts and lunches of higher nutritional quality and are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables than non-participating students.
- **Expand Community Eligibility:** HHFK improved children's access to school meals through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Reauthorization should increase the number of high-poverty schools that offer free meals to all students.
- **Ensure Verification and Other Updates Work for Students and Schools:** Reauthorization should protect eligible children's access to school meals by leveraging additional opportunities to directly certify low-income children for free school meals. Reauthorization should ensure that any changes to the process of verifying eligibility, or any updates to HHFK, do not cause eligible children to lose school meal benefits or increase administrative burdens for schools.

- **Train and Support School Food Service Professionals:** Reauthorization should include ongoing professional development and training for school food service staff at no cost to the employee, during regular, paid working hours, and maximize hands-on training. These improvements are included in the Improving Training for School Food Service Workers Act (S. 2331 in the 116th Congress).
- **Provide Adequate Equipment and Infrastructure:** Schools need updated kitchen equipment and infrastructure in order to prepare and serve healthy meals in a cost-effective, efficient manner. Reauthorization should include expanded grants and low- and no-interest loans for school kitchen equipment and infrastructure, and technical assistance to school districts for upgrading kitchen facilities.
- **Increase Access to Out-of-School-Time Programs:** After-school and summer nutrition programs provide meals and snacks at schools and other sites in low-income communities and serve primarily low-income children, combining meals with educational, enrichment, and recreational activities. Increasing access to summer food and other out-of-school time programs connected to enrichment activities should include **improving area eligibility** so more low-income children can receive meals during the summer and after school. **Summer EBT benefits** should be provided to children who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals when schools are closed (e.g., during the summer, extended school breaks, and unexpected school closures) to expand upon the success of the Pandemic EBT program.
- **Reduce School Meals Debt and Eliminate Stigma:** Efforts should be made to reduce school meal debts, and USDA should be directed to set a standard policy, including a requirement that communications be directed to parents and guardians, to ensure children are not stigmatized for this debt.

The pandemic brought into sharp focus the depth of food insecurity in the United States; we saw it in the food lines that snaked down blocks and around corners. We are deeply grateful for the benefit programs Congress created and expanded to address hunger across our country. However, *no* time is an acceptable time for children in America—the wealthiest nation in the world—to go hungry or be without nutritious meals. Our goal should not be to return to pre-pandemic conditions, but to do much better by our children than we have in the past. At the very least, that means making sure they have the healthy, nutritious meals that prepare them for learning. Thank you for this opportunity to share our priorities for reauthorization of child nutrition programs.

Sincerely,



Director of Government Relations  
National Education Association