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## HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL

All students, regardless of income or race, deserve access to the healthy, nutritious meals that will prepare them to learn and place them on the path to success. Providing meals to students at no cost to them improves their health as well as their classroom performance; eliminates the stigma of student meal debt; and relieves 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. We must build on this accomplishment with a robust response to childhood hunger that ensures our students have a solid foundation for growth and learning.

## PRINCIPLES FOR 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 meal programs.
- ▶ According to the USDA, 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. The meals children receive today will shape their food choices and health outcomes as adults.

### Expand Community Eligibility

- ▶ The HHFK Act 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 Schools and Students

- ▶ 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, 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 and H.R. 2651 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 their 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.
- ▶ Providing **Summer EBT benefits** 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) will 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.

### Expand the Farm to School Grant Program

- ▶ Congress should expand and strengthen the Farm to School Grant Program that helps schools procure local foods for schools meals and supports local activities such as school gardens and hands-on learning.