



CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS

COSSBA Requests

- Provide increased reimbursements for school lunch and breakfast; provide funds to cover higher food/labor costs; and expand lunch and breakfast programs to offer free meals to all students.
- Reauthorization that reduces burdensome federal mandates and provides flexibility for school districts to administer healthy meals students want to eat, to include reducing meal planning complexities, cutting red tape, and maximizing staff time and funds for meal prep.
- Congress must bolster the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs to include expansion of community eligibility so that more schools serving large numbers of low-income children can provide meals at no charge to all students, including creating a statewide option so that states could more easily begin offering meals at no charge to all students. Under community eligibility, school districts must cover any costs that exceed the federal reimbursement. Because the reimbursement sometimes falls short of covering a school's full meal costs, many eligible schools have chosen not to participate.
- No unfunded mandates or under-resourced requirements.

Farm Bill Priorities

- Support robust funding and flexibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), to ensure families have the support they need to combat hunger.
- Strengthen funding and support for programs that directly help children, including the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and the Food and Agriculture Service Learning Program.

Issue History

Millions of public-school students are served by national child nutrition programs every year. Free and reduced-priced meals offered through federal programs support kids' healthy development and ensure that students from low-income households have access to nutritious breakfasts and lunches at school. When students come to school hungry, they can't learn.

As nearly one in five children in our nation live in households without enough to eat, these programs are a literal lifeline for students and may often provide the only full and healthy meals they get all day. Unfortunately, continued fiscal uncertainties, persistent challenges, and cost increases continue to threaten the stability of school meal programs. According to a recent survey by the School Nutrition Association:

- 98% of school meal programs are struggling with increased costs for food (71% said this was a significant challenge) and 95% are struggling with increased costs for labor;
- Just 20% of programs said the current federal reimbursement rate is sufficient to cover the cost of producing a lunch and almost all nutrition directors are concerned about the long-term financial sustainability of their programs;
- 89% of programs are challenged by staff shortages – exacerbated by inadequate reimbursement rates; and

- Of school districts that do not offer free meals to all students, 97% reported continued challenges from unpaid meal debt, with the average debt continuing to climb annually – increasing more than 25% from 2023 to 2024.

While increased reimbursement rates and enhanced waiver authority expired in July 2023, the challenges facing school meal programs have not gone away. As these survey results show, schools across the country continue to struggle to afford providing adequate meals to students in need.