

Child Nutrition Reauthorization Priorities



NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH AND BREAKFAST ACT

Every decade, Congress reauthorizes the law that governs the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs, referred to as the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act. The latest iteration of the law, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (Public Law 111-296), expired on September 30, 2015, and presents Congress with an opportunity to provide some overdue updates to the legislation.

To assist Congress in this effort and build on the strengths from the current legislation, AASA's policy priorities for this year's reauthorization fall into the following four buckets concerning:

- (1) increasing access to the federal school meals programs;
- (2) providing additional emergency relief funding to help school food operators continue to recover from the pandemic;
- (3) reducing the red tape and administrative burden associated with NSLP and SBP; and
- (4) maintaining the current sodium 1-target level, 50% enriched whole grain and flavored milk flexibilities as implemented by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).



CHILD NUTRITION REAUTHORIZATION

The passages to follow include more details around AASA's policy recommendations in the previously mentioned areas and our rationale for why Congress must pass these provisions during this year's CNR.

- 1 Lower the Community Eligibility Threshold from 40% to 25%
- 2 Raise the ISP Multiplier from 1.6 to 1.9
- 3 Oppose Any Effort to Block Grant the Federal School Meal Programs
- 4 Provide at Least \$1.3 Billion to Cover Losses to School Food Operators from SY 2020-21
- 5 Preserve Existing Nutritional Flexibilities Around Enriched Whole Grains, Sodium and Flavored Milk in This Year's Child Nutrition Authorization

INCREASING ACCESS TO SCHOOL MEALS

AASA members strongly support increasing access to the federal school meal programs.

According to a recent analysis by the Brookings Institution, 16.5% of households with children reported that it was sometimes or often the case that their children were not eating enough due to a lack of resources during the 2020-21 school year (SY). Consequently, this means that roughly **13.9 million children lived in a household characterized by child food insecurity at least once during 2020.**¹ While our LEAs were able to keep students fed throughout the past year, in part thanks to the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and the funding from the COVID-19 emergency relief packages, **Congress must build on this work and strengthen the federal school meal programs.**

To accomplish this, AASA recommends improving the Community Eligibility Program, which allows LEAs with at least 40 percent of its students participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program (TANF), Food Distribution Program for Indian Reservations (FDPIR), or Medicaid in some states to serve meals to all children in the school for free. Specifically, AASA recommends the following policy changes to improve CEP:

- 1. Lower the community eligibility threshold from 40% to 25%,** so that more LEAs can participate in the program. By moving the needle down 15 percentage points, Congress will ensure that LEAs are at the cusp of qualifying for the program and are able to participate.
- 2. Raise the ISP multiplier from 1.6 to 1.9.** By enacting this policy change, Congress will make it more financially viable for more high-poverty school districts to participate in the program and ensure more students are coming to class ready to learn.

In addition to strengthening CEP, **AASA opposes any effort to block grant the federal school meal programs.** The success and sustainability of school meal programs depend on continued federal involvement, including federal reimbursements for each school meal served. Block grants would dismantle an effective federal program and put students at risk by cutting funds and abolishing federal nutrition standards. Congress must oppose any efforts to block grant school nutrition programs.

¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/09/about-14-million-children-in-the-us-are-not-getting-enough-to-eat/>

PROVIDING ADDITIONAL EMERGENCY RELIEF TO SCHOOL FOOD OPERATORS

According to the data from USDA on the number of meals served between March 2020 and September 2020, schools have seen significant declines in reimbursements from NSLP, SBP and the summer food service program (SFSP).²

To better illustrate this historic decline, **total reimbursement for NSLP lunches, SBP breakfasts, and SFSP meal costs in FY2020 was \$1,364,674,575, or 7.65%, less than FY 2019.**³

In light of these findings and the fact that meal service during the COVID-19 pandemic has been associated with higher costs around packaging and deliveries and declines in a la carte sales, it is no surprise that a recent survey from the School Nutrition Association found that 62% of school nutrition directors were anticipating a loss for SY 2020-21, and an additional 28% of respondents were unsure of what to expect in terms of the financial health of their programs.

While AASA is appreciative of USDA's extension of the COVID-19 school nutrition regulatory waivers and the emergency funding for school food operators included in the December 2020 Consolidated Appropriations Act, it is imperative that Congress provide at least \$1.3 billion to cover losses to school food operators from SY 2020-21.



2 https://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/6_News_Publications_and_Research/8_SNA_Research/Taking-Stock-School-Nutrition-Reimbursement-And-Meals-Served-in-2020.pdf

3 Ibid



REDUCING ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

School food service operators strive to be responsible stewards of federal funds and welcome efforts to ensure school meal programs fully comply with regulatory requirements. However, School Food Authorities (SFAs) and State agencies that oversee these programs are overwhelmed by excessive reporting requirements required under the shorter three-year Administrative Review (AR) cycle. Layered on top of monthly and annual reporting requirements, and additional audits and inspections, these administrative mandates take substantial time away from the mission of serving students. Meanwhile, the shorter cycle forces State agencies to divert substantial staff time and travel budgets for more frequent reviews.

As such, **Congress must encourage USDA to return to a five-year cycle for SFAs consistently in compliance.** State agencies will be able to conduct more thorough reviews and school nutrition professionals will be able to spend more time focused on serving healthy meals.



NATIONAL STANDARDS

The passage of the Healthy Hunger Free-Kids Act established new nutritional standards on school food service operators for the first time in 15-years. These standards required LEAs to make progress towards improving the nutritional value of meals as sold as part of NSLP, SBP, or SFSP. While AASA recognizes the importance of providing healthy well-balanced meals to students, it is critical to point out that these nutritional standards were never fully implemented because of the difficulties school districts and manufacturers found in complying with some of the more ambitious portions of the law.

Specifically, many school districts struggled to meet requirements that:

- (1) mandated all grains offered in the NSLP and SBP be 100% whole grain-rich beginning in SY 2014-2015;
- (2) placed more stringent sodium standards—targets 2 and 3—to take effect by SY 2017–2018; and
- (3) prohibited LEAs' ability to sell and serve 1% flavored milk.

In acknowledgement of LEAs challenges in meeting these standards, USDA issued the 2018 Final Rule that codified flexibilities that enabled school districts to serve 50% enriched whole grains, retain sodium target 1 levels through SY 2023—2024, and permitted the sale of 1% flavored milk.





NATIONAL STANDARDS, CONT.

USDA's rationale behind this policy change was simple. First, the target 2 and 3 sodium standards are contentious, as the scientific evidence to support further reductions in sodium for school meals is inconclusive.

Increased blood pressure in children is most strongly associated with obesity, not with sodium intake, which is a finding supported by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Second, if the department had moved through with the requirements as written, school meal providers would have to remove items such as cheese, marinara sauce, and pasta from their menus. Consequently, this would mean more food would end up in the trash due to students' taste preferences.

While AASA recognizes the importance of promoting healthy eating habits around sodium, enriched whole grains, and dairy intake, it is important for Congress to acknowledge that healthy meals are only healthy if students eat them.

As such, our members call on Congress to preserve existing nutritional flexibilities around enriched whole grains, sodium, and flavored milk in this year's child nutrition reauthorization.

