

June 23, 2023

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chair, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, &
Forestry
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, & Forestry
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Virginia Foxx
Chair, Committee on Education & The
Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Robert C. "Bobby" Scott
Ranking Member, Committee on Education &
The Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Martin Heinrich
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on
Agriculture, Rural Development, FDA, &
Related Agencies
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Hoeven
Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee
on Agriculture, Rural Development, FDA, &
Related Agencies
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Andy Harris
Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on
Agriculture, Rural Development, FDA, &
Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Sanford Bishop, Jr.
Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee
on Agriculture, Rural Development, FDA, &
Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

RE: Expiring school meal reimbursement rates under Public Law: 117-158, the "Keep Kids Fed Act" (KKFA), effective June 30, 2023

Dear Chairs Stabenow, Foxx, Heinrich, and Harris, and Ranking Members Boozman, Scott, Hoeven, and Bishop:

We are writing to you on behalf of the 18 national organizations listed below—representing thousands of K-12 education and nutrition leaders, practitioners, and advocates—to express our concern about the impending expiration of critical funds for school meal programs provided by the Keep Kids Fed Act. Several provisions providing temporary increases in reimbursement rates for breakfast, lunch, and other school meals will sunset on June 30, 2023, at a time when districts and families continue to struggle with affording high food and other living costs. **We urge you to extend the KKFA's school meal reimbursement temporary increases for an additional year to help local communities continue to feed the millions of students served by these programs over the summer and during the 2023-2024 school year.**

The KKFA has been a critical lifeline to students and families by providing a temporary increase in funding for schools to ensure children continue to have access to high-quality, affordable meals, and are well-fed and ready to learn. The law provided an additional 40-cent reimbursement for school lunch, 15-cent reimbursement for school breakfast, and 10-cent reimbursement for meals under the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) for the 2022-2023 school year. We implore Congress to extend these provisions for another year and provide necessary support for the 2023-2024 school year. We recognize that the KKFA was passed to assist communities with recovering from the pandemic, and the national public health emergency has now ended. However, many of the same economic challenges remain, including high inflation, supply chain disruptions, labor shortages, and rising food insecurity. Once this funding expires, many districts and families will struggle to afford to feed students in such difficult economic circumstances without additional support.

Nutrition and education professionals are working tirelessly for students by implementing innovative feeding models to maximize student access to healthy and delicious meals; adapting quickly to procure food for kids despite dealing with supply shortages, delivery delays, and missing or incomplete orders; and doing their best to recruit, retain, and train quality professionals to serve students—both in the cafeteria and the classroom. However, districts are incurring unsustainable costs as they navigate increasingly volatile economic circumstances with record-high inflation for food, fuel, and supplies to operate programs; and as they adapt to ongoing labor challenges (e.g., staffing shortages, wage inflation, and training costs) for food service professionals and other school personnel. Congress' and the USDA's leadership in helping educators address these challenges has not gone unnoticed; it has been critical to supporting student well-being, learning, and success. The KKFA's temporary funding has also provided welcome relief for struggling families experiencing food insecurity and financial hardship, as they know they can rely on their schools and elected leaders to help provide their children with healthy, affordable meals.

As inflation and other adverse economic factors drive up meal program costs, districts are still legally required to pass a balanced budget; the question, though, is at what cost? Without additional funding to offset a temporary high-inflation cycle, districts will have no choice but to absorb the additional costs required to continue feeding students. This means that already limited education dollars that could go toward student academic recovery and mental health services must be reallocated instead to support nutrition programs, forcing district leaders to make difficult spending decisions that don't fully address student needs. In some cases, districts may be forced to increase menu prices to offset costs, shifting the burden onto families that are already struggling to make ends meet with rising housing, utility, transportation, and other living costs.

Additionally, a significant drop in reimbursement rates may discourage districts from opting into the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows schools or districts to offer meals to all students at no charge if they serve a high percentage of low-income students. While districts consider many variables before opting in or out of CEP, financial sustainability is a driving factor, and reduced reimbursement rates may cause some districts who are on the cusp of qualifying to opt out. Declining participation in CEP would reduce student access to free meals at a time when there is a rising need.

We appreciate your time and consideration of this critical issue and ask you to please act swiftly to address the expiring KKFA reimbursement rate increases for critical federal meal programs.

Granting a one-year extension of the law's provisions will provide much-needed relief to help families and school communities continue to recover and support students.

If you have any questions, please reach out to Elleka Yost (Association of School Business Officials International) at eyost@asbointl.org, Tara Thomas (AASA, The School Superintendents Association) at tthomas@aasa.org, or Cathy Schuchart (School Nutrition Association) at cschuchart@schoolnutrition.org.

Sincerely,

AASA, The School Superintendents Association
Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
American Commodity Distribution Association
American Federation of Teachers
Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO)
Chef Ann Foundation
Children's Defense Fund
Council of Administrators of Special Education
Council of the Great City Schools
Food Research & Action Center (FRAC)
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
National Education Association
National PTA
National School Boards Association
School Nutrition Association
Share Our Strength
Urban School Food Alliance