Feeding Success

The Current State of School Meal Programs

AASA THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION

Introduction

In 1946, Congress created the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to address child hunger and malnutrition and encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities. Twenty years later, Congress established a breakfast pilot that would be officially authorized as the School Breakfast Program (SBP) in 1975. Today, these programs serve daily meals to roughly 30 million children in over 94,000 schools,[1] ensuring that students are ready and able to learn in the classroom. These programs offer a critical service to families by providing free or subsidized meals ("reduced price") to students from low-income households. According to the latest data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service, in 2024, 18.4% of households with children in the United States were food insecure. For many children, school meals are the only reliable meals they get every week.

NSLP and SBP have been shown to reduce food insecurity, obesity rates and adverse health outcomes[2] while improving academic achievement, student behavior and attendance.[3] These benefits are more pronounced in programs that provide healthy school meals for all at no cost to students or families.[4]

School districts that participate in NSLP and SBP receive federal reimbursements on a sliding scale for meals served that meet the nutrition standards that USDA regularly updates to align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs). USDA is expected to update the nutrition regulations soon to align with the latest iteration of the DGAs that were released in January 2026.

In order for these programs to continue feeding children, federal policy must center the experiences of local practitioners who fully understand the complexities of the school meal programs they implement and the supports necessary to ensure continued success. This summer, AASA, The School Superintendents Association, representing more than 10,000 public school district leaders across the country, surveyed members to gather data on the current state of school meal programs and identify challenges, assess current capacity and opportunities for improvement.

During June and July 2026, AASA's survey on school meal programs generated responses from 429 school district leaders representing 43 states. For the purposes of this survey, "school meal programs" were defined as encompassing both the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP); the term is used in that manner throughout this report.

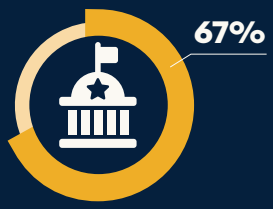
RESPONDENT PROFILE:

- Locality: 63% rural districts; 27% suburban districts; 10% urban districts
- Enrollment: 57% small districts (<2,500 students); 28% medium districts (2,500-9,999); 14% large districts (≥10,000 students)
- Poverty/percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals (FRPM): 10% high-poverty (FRPM > 75%); 34% mid-high poverty districts (FRPM = 51-75%); 40% mid-low poverty districts (FRPM = 26-50%); and 16% low-poverty districts (FRPM ≤ 25%)
- Healthy school meals for all (HSMFA): Fifty-five percent (55%) of respondents provide free meals for all students regardless of family income.

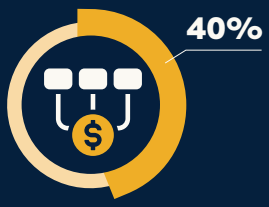
Executive Summary

School meal programs play a critical role in supporting student health, well-being, and academic success. Our findings demonstrate that many districts are operating these programs under significant financial and operational constraints that limit their ability to serve healthy, appealing meals that align with the federal nutrition standards and expand practices like scratch cooking. District leaders reported that insufficient reimbursement, staffing shortages, procurement challenges, limited kitchen capacity, and low student acceptance can make it difficult to operate financially sustainable programs. In some communities, districts are diverting resources from other educational priorities or drawing down reserves to continue serving meals.

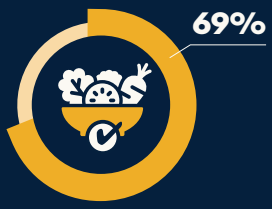
KEY FINDINGS



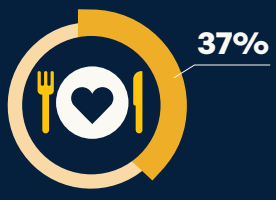
67% of respondents indicated that current **federal funding levels** present a moderate or significant challenge for their school meal programs.



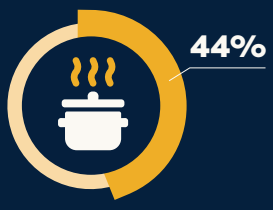
40% of district leaders reported that last year they **had to pull funding from elsewhere** in their budget to cover the cost of their school meal programs.



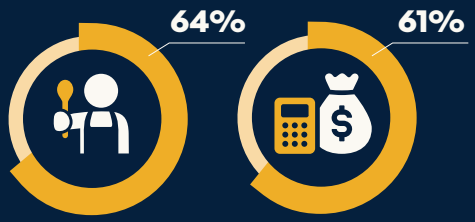
When funding is excluded, the most commonly reported challenge facing school meal programs is **compliance with federal nutrition standards** (69%)



In the context of the current federal nutrition regulations, 37% of respondents reported that **student acceptance/ participation** was the greatest operational challenge.



Less than half of respondents (44%) cited that every school in their district **has a full kitchen equipped for scratch cooking**.

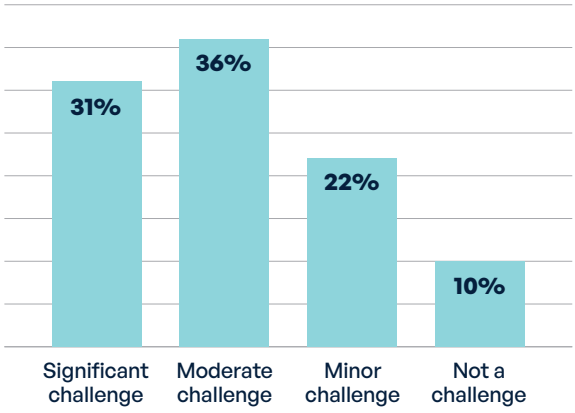


The most commonly reported barriers to expanding scratch cooking are **staffing** (64%) and **funding** (61%).

Funding Falls Short

Federal school meal reimbursement levels vary based on factors such as location, percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced-price meals (FRPM) and certification of performance-based assistance. For an average of $4.90 per lunch and $2.80 per breakfast,[6] school meal programs must cover the cost of food, labor, supplies and equipment. Our findings demonstrate that, for many districts, the current reimbursement rate is inadequate. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of respondents reported that current federal funding levels present a moderate or significant challenge for their school meal programs.

To what extent do current federal funding levels present a challenge for your school meal programs?

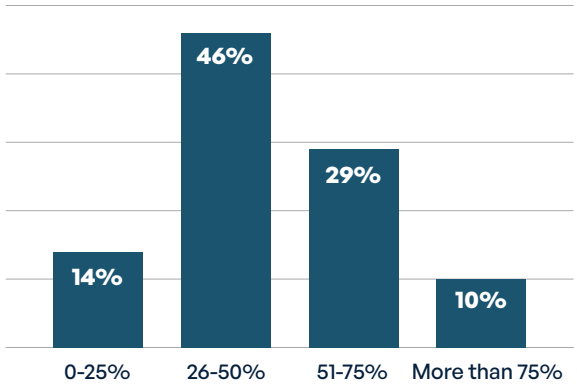


When disaggregated by locality, rural respondents were more likely to report that the current federal funding levels present a significant challenge than their nonrural peers. Thirty-three percent (33%) of rural respondents selected this option versus 28% of nonrural respondents.

Declining enrollment and revenue coupled with the rising costs of food, labor, health care and transportation are putting significant strain on district budgets and forcing superintendents to make difficult decisions on where to allocate funding and what services to cut. Our report finds that for many districts, school meal programs are placing an additional burden on district budgets.

School meal programs are designed to operate as nonprofit food service accounts that are financially separate from districts' general budgets. However, for many respondents, that is not the case. Forty percent (40%) of district leaders indicated that, within the last year, they had to pull funding from elsewhere to cover the cost of the school meal programs. Almost half (49%) of respondents who had to pull funding from their budgets were from mid-low poverty districts (26-50% FRPM). Our findings suggest that respondents from districts with higher percentages of students eligible for FRPM were less likely to report having to redirect funding from their general budgets to support their school meal programs. The reimbursement rate for reduced-priced and free meals is much higher than that of paid meals, so these districts are likely receiving more in federal reimbursements. However, a meaningful share of districts with more than 50% of students who qualify for FRPM still had to pull funding from their general budgets. Twenty-nine percent (29%) of districts who had to divert funding to their school meal programs were mid-high poverty districts (51-75% FRPM) and 10% were high poverty districts (more than 75% FRPM).

Respondents who pulled funding to cover the cost of their programs AND % of FRPM:



Rural respondents and respondents that do not participate in healthy school meals for all (HSMFA) programs were more likely to indicate that they had to pull funding from elsewhere to cover their school meal programs than their counterparts. Forty-seven percent (47%) of the rural survey participants indicated that they had diverted funding versus just 28% of nonrural respondents. Thirty-four percent (34%) of HSMFA districts had to pull funding versus 47% of non-HSMFA districts.

TRADEOFFS

When districts must divert funding to support their school meal programs, they are forced to make difficult decisions about where those resources can be redirected from. Among the districts who had to redirect funding, more than half of respondents (55%) reported that they had to tap their reserves or "rainy day balances" to cover the cost of their school meal programs.

School district reserves or "rainy day balances" are typically intended to address temporary financial disruptions, cash flow needs, emergencies, unforeseen revenue losses, or one-time operational and capital expenses. Ideally, reserve balances are maintained at sufficient levels, often based on a percentage of expenditures or number of days' cash on hand, so districts can respond quickly to emergencies or unexpected costs without disrupting educational services. A report published earlier this year found that 52% of school districts were having to tap their reserves to cover the increased cost of health care premiums.[7] Coupled together, these findings point to a troubling trend of districts having to tap their reserves to cover the rising costs of recurring expenses. This raises significant concerns about districts' long-term financial sustainability.

Other common tradeoffs included deferring maintenance or upgrades to buildings or postponing capital projects (33%) and reducing spending on academic programs, intervention supports tutoring or enrichment offerings (31%) to make up for insufficient federal reimbursement.

> "Each year, the district must transfer a substantial amount from its general fund to offset nutrition program deficits, diverting resources that would otherwise support classroom instruction and student learning. The current reimbursement structure does not reflect the true cost of providing nutritious meals that comply with federal regulations. As a result, we have been forced to seriously consider whether we can continue operating our school nutrition program. For a small, rural, high-poverty community like ours, the loss of school meals would have devastating consequences for students and families who depend on them every day. School districts should not be forced to choose between educating students and feeding them. We strongly urge Congress and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to provide reimbursement rates that reflect the actual cost of meeting federal nutrition standards so that schools can continue serving children without sacrificing educational opportunities."
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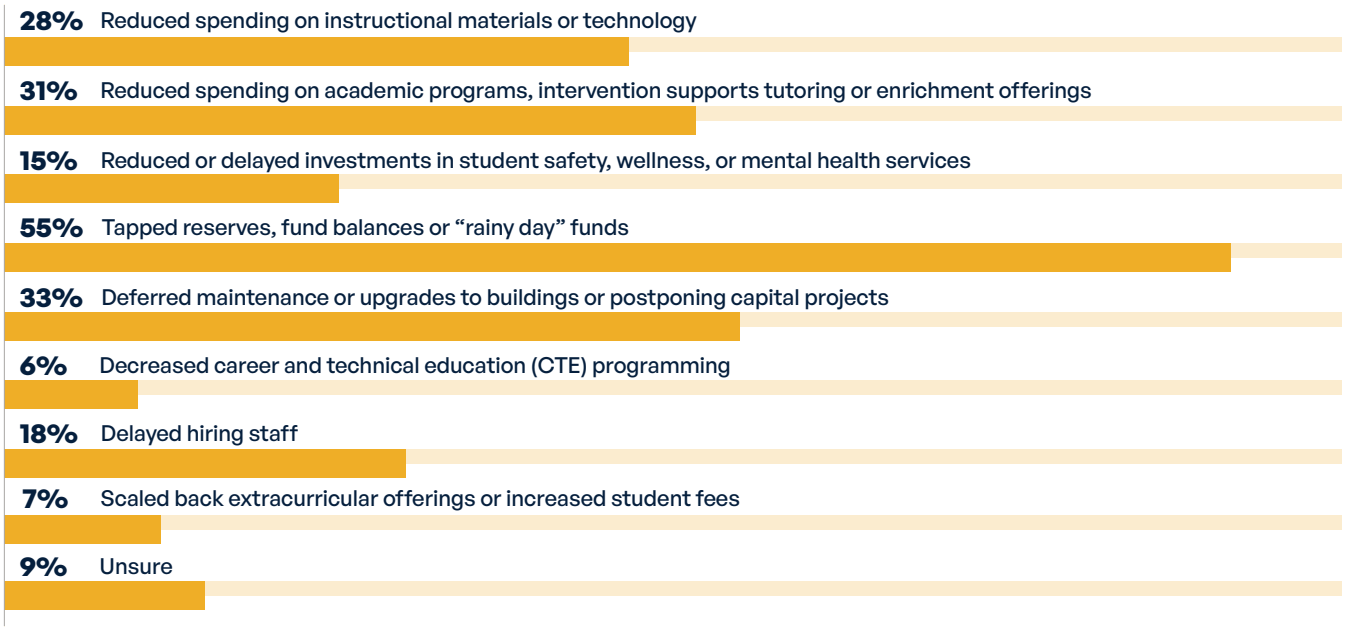
> *— Small, rural district in Montana*

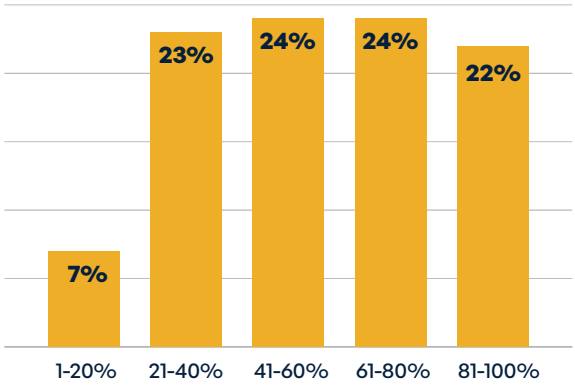
What tradeoffs did your district have to make to cover these costs?



School meal programs are an essential service that districts provide for students to ensure that they are ready and able to learn. Insufficient federal funding for school meal programs is forcing districts to forego other student services and supports or deplete reserves intended to help districts respond to emergencies. In the worst case scenarios, some districts may have to consider withdrawing from the program altogether.

District reallocation of funding is not the only evidence that federal reimbursement is not enough to cover the full cost of programs. We asked respondents what percentage of their program costs were covered by federal reimbursements. Responses varied considerably, but generally federal reimbursements did not cover the full cost of operating school meal programs. Only 22% of respondents reported that the federal reimbursement covered 81-100% of their program costs.

What percentage of your program costs are covered by federal reimbursements?



Respondents that participate in HSMFA programs were more likely to report having a higher percentage of program costs covered by federal reimbursements. One explanation is likely participation in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). CEP is the most common federal option for districts to participate in HSMFA programs and has a different reimbursement structure than the FRPM model. For CEP, districts have an identified student percentage (ISP), which is determined based on the number of students who automatically qualify for free school meals without submitting paperwork.[8] The ISP is then multiplied by 1.6 to determine what percentage of meals are reimbursed at the free rate, and the remainder is reimbursed at the paid rate. Districts that can participate in CEP and have higher ISPs are reimbursed at the free rate for a greater share of meals than they would under the traditional free, reduced-price, and paid meal structure.

% covered by federal reimbursement	Participates in HSMFA	Does not participate in HSMFA
1-10%	0%	30%
11-20%	5%	7%
21-30%	5%	13%
31-40%	11%	16%
41-50%	8%	18%
51-60%	9%	12%
61-70%	10%	11%
71-80%	15%	9%
81-90%	14%	5%
91-100%	18%	3%

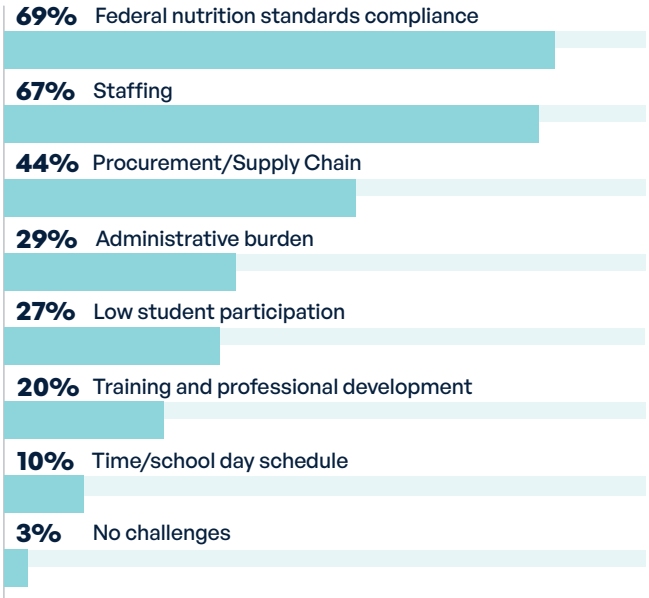
In many cases, districts have other sources of revenue to cover some of their program costs. Districts may generate revenue based on the sale of meals to families that do not qualify for free or reduced-priced meals or through other food sales, known as "competitive foods." Fourteen states have statewide HSMFA programs or free breakfast for all policies and contribute additional funding to help districts cover remaining costs.[9]

It is important to note that diverting funding is not an option for all school districts. Many may not have sufficient reserves to pull from. If funding is insufficient and districts are unable to pull other funds to subsidize their programs, they may have to shift some of the cost onto families who pay for meals or make changes to reduce the cost of the program and work within the margins provided. Some cost reduction measures include increasing student participation, reducing food waste, and adapting menus to rely on more processed foods that require less preparation and reduce labor costs.

More Than Money

Funding is a key factor in determining how programs operate, but it is not the only challenge that school meal programs face. These programs are large food service operations that require highly trained staff and robust student participation in order to succeed. They must also navigate complex regulatory requirements along with the daily logistics of procurement and unpredictable supply chains. We asked respondents to list their top three challenges in implementing school meals, with the exclusion of funding. The three most common challenges selected were federal nutrition standards compliance (69%), staffing (67%) and procurement/supply chain (44%). Other common challenges were administrative burden (29%), low student participation (27%) and training and professional development (20%).

Challenges Districts Face in Implementing School Meals



Differences emerged when responses were disaggregated by rurality. Among rural districts, federal nutrition standards compliance was the most frequently reported challenge (75%), followed by staffing (66%). For nonrural districts, staffing was the leading challenge (68%), while federal nutrition standards compliance was the second most frequently cited challenge (59%). Procurement/supply chain was the third most common challenge for both rural and nonrural. Rural respondents reported greater challenges related to student participation, with 31% identifying it as a challenge compared with 19% of nonrural respondents. Meanwhile, nonrural respondents were more likely to report time and scheduling constraints, with 14% citing this challenge versus 7% of rural respondents.

> For the last three consecutive years, our food service staff has been short by 3 employees. Due to funding, it is impossible to pay a competitive wage, let alone provide competitive benefits. Less staff equals more reliance on processed foods that can be heated and served. Until we are differently staffed, we can't think about making changes.
>
> *—Small, rural district in Wisconsin*

FEDERAL NUTRITION STANDARDS COMPLIANCE

Sixty-nine percent (69%) of respondents reported that federal nutrition standards compliance was a top implementation challenge for their school meal programs. To receive federal reimbursement for the meals they serve, school meal programs must abide by regulations that establish requirements for meal components such as vegetables, fruit, protein, whole grains and milk, as well as limits for sodium and added sugars. In order to be successful, programs must formulate menus that meet the standards and appeal to students, all within the confines of what is possible with available staffing, products and funding. While factors such as student participation, procurement, funding and employee retention/recruitment are all closely interconnected, we asked respondents to identify their greatest operational challenge in meeting the federal nutrition standards.

More than 1 in 3 respondents (37%) selected student acceptance/participation as the greatest challenge. For some districts, the standards can make it challenging to serve compliant meals that students will consume. The standards may result in foods that the students are not familiar with or do not like, which results in students not consuming the meals or getting a tray to begin with.

Low participation undermines the core purpose of the program—to ensure students get the meals they need to learn—but it can also exacerbate financial challenges. Programs are only reimbursed for the meals that are actually served, not prepared. Lower participation therefore results in less reimbursement for school meal programs. Not surprisingly, respondents that participate in HSMFA were less likely than their counterparts to report student acceptance/participation impacts as a challenge in meeting the standards. Providing free meals to all students has been shown to significantly increase participation.[10]

The second most common challenge selected was insufficient funding with 30% of respondents selecting this option. While reimbursement levels affect all aspects of school meal operations, funding can be particularly important in meeting federal nutrition standards. Districts must often absorb the higher costs associated with purchasing compliant products, investing in equipment, providing staff training, and maintaining the workforce necessary to prepare and serve meals that meet federal requirements.

One in six respondents (16%) chose product availability/procurement as their greatest challenge. Districts must identify products that meet increasingly specific requirements for sodium, added sugars, and whole grains in addition to serving sizes. Compliant products can be more difficult to source, more expensive, or unavailable through existing distributors. This challenge can be particularly acute when product reformulations lag behind regulatory changes.

Given the geographic challenges often associated with rural communities, one might expect rural districts to be more likely to face challenges with product availability/procurement. Interestingly, our findings show that that is not necessarily the case. Roughly the same percentage of both rural and nonrural respondents selected procurement/supply chain as their greatest operational challenge in meeting the standards. Sixteen percent (16%) of rural respondents and 15% of nonrural respondents selected this option.

Nonrural respondents were more likely to select employee recruitment/retention than their rural counterparts. Fifteen percent (15%) of nonrural respondents chose this option versus just 10% of rural respondents.

> We continue to struggle with the availability of whole grain products for our cafeteria. Often, they are out of stock or just unavailable. We have also experienced issues with palatability because our students do not like the texture or taste. They often complain that it tastes like cardboard. Our cafeteria staff works hard to serve good, home cooked, healthy meals with locally grown beef and poultry that our students will eat. It would be highly beneficial to our staff and students if we had flexibility in the types of bread product we could serve.
>
> *—Small, Rural District in Oklahoma*

WHOLE GRAINS, SODIUM AND ADDED SUGARS

Within the standards, we wanted to understand which requirements districts found most difficult to meet. The survey restricted the answer options to whole grain requirements, sodium limits and product-based added sugar limits since they are widely seen as the core components of the federal nutrition regulations. For context, the whole grains requirement was effective July 2022 and has not changed. The current sodium limit was effective July 2023, and the next reduction requirement is July 2027. The product-based added sugar limit is the most recent change and took effect in July 2025.

Thirty-five percent (35%) of respondents selected sodium limits as the most challenging, 25% selected product-based added sugars and 21% selected whole grain requirements. Seven percent (7%) reported no challenges.

Respondents from rural and smaller districts were more likely than their counterparts to identify whole grain requirements as the most challenging standard to meet. Twenty-six percent (26%) of rural respondents reported whole grain as the most difficult to meet versus just 13% of nonrural respondents. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of respondents with less than 2,500 students also reported whole grains, compared to just 12% of districts with more than 2,500 students.

Among respondents who identified student acceptance as their greatest operational challenge,

40% selected sodium limits as the most difficult requirement to meet,

while 28% selected product-based added-sugar limits.

Among respondents who identified product availability as their greatest operational challenge,

41% selected product-based added-sugar limits as the most difficult requirement to meet,

while 34% selected sodium limits.

As discussed earlier, updated standards are expected soon and could change these requirements. The 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines recommend limiting added sugars and increasing the intake of whole grains. Identifying where districts experience the greatest difficulty can help guide federal policymakers as they consider future changes to the nutrition standards.

Scratch Cooking & District Capacity

The 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend limiting highly processed and pre-packaged foods. This recommendation could result in updated standards that encourage or require more "scratch cooking or scratch preparation." The term scratch cooking or scratch preparation means preparing food in-house using raw, whole, or minimally processed ingredients. Aside from the potential change in regulations, there has been a broader effort for districts to increase scratch cooking in their school meal programs. We surveyed members to understand the current prevalence of scratch cooking and the barriers for districts in expanding the practice.

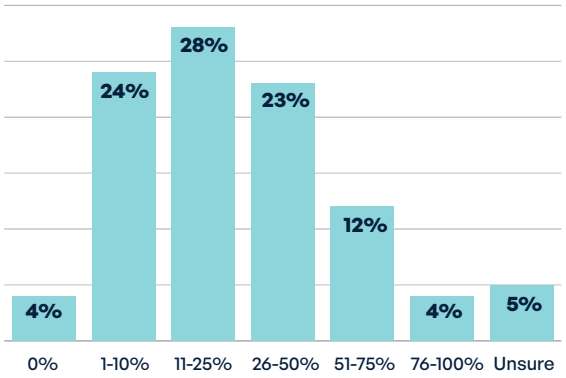
Overall, we found that scratch cooking is used by most districts to some degree, but very few districts can utilize this method for most of the foods they serve. The majority of respondents (75%) said less than 50% of their meals are scratch cooked. When further broken down within that answer range, we saw a relatively even distribution: 24% of districts reported scratch preparing 1-10% of meals, 28% preparing 11-25%, and 23% preparing 26-50%. Only 4% of districts reported that 76-100% of their meals are scratch prepared.

> Our motto: moving forward one ingredient at a time. The shift toward local, minimally processed whole foods began with a 2016 community wellness planning process and a plan adopted in 2017-2018. Building capacity took years: we created and hired a Director of Student Nutrition Services (a certified executive chef), upgraded kitchens for scratch cooking and food processing, and partnered with FoodCorps and Maine Farm to School. In 2021, we secured a $100,000 USDA Farm to School grant plus more than $50,000 in additional grants, aiming to raise local whole foods on menus from 10% to 30% within 24 months. The real work is unglamorous and ongoing. Our kitchens buy more than 700 distinct ingredients, and we replace heavily processed items one at a time. Each swap carries hidden cost and effort: prime vendor contracts and bidding, food safety vetting, sourcing from local producers whose seasons and volumes do not match a distributor's catalog, new recipes tested and standardized, checks that students actually eat the new option, and repeated staff training. A core grant goal was training 100% of food service staff in local procurement, scratch cooking, and plant-based techniques. Switching to Maine white fish fillets, away from a breaded convenience item, required sourcing, menu work, and staff training at once, then had to be sustained every month. We are also building a centralized freezer to prep and freeze whole foods in season and to distribute ingredients to schools year-round."
>
> *—Small, rural district in Maine*

Over the past three years, the district has intentionally transformed its school nutrition program by preparing more meals from raw ingredients while significantly expanding the use of locally sourced foods. What appears to be a simple ingredient change is, in reality, a complete operational transformation. Every new menu item requires sourcing new products, building relationships with local vendors, navigating procurement regulations, revising menus and production records, testing recipes, redesigning kitchen workflows, and training staff to consistently prepare safe, high-quality meals from scratch. This transformation did not happen overnight. It required more than three years of planning, training, continuous improvement, and sustained investment. The district estimates investing more than $150,000 beyond normal food costs in equipment, staff development, implementation, marketing, and operational improvements. Grant funding has been the catalyst, providing the resources needed to strengthen culinary skills, improve kitchen efficiency, expand local food procurement, and build a sustainable scratch cooking program. The investment is producing measurable results. During the past year alone, the district increased local food purchases by 25 percent, strengthening partnerships with local farmers while expanding students' access to fresh, scratch-prepared meals. Staff confidence and culinary skills continue to grow, allowing more meals to be prepared from raw ingredients while maintaining high standards of food safety, quality, and efficiency. Yet this work is far from complete. Continued investment in culinary training and professional development remains essential as school nutrition programs continue expanding scratch cooking and adapting to evolving nutrition standards. Our experience demonstrates that meaningful change is possible—but it is not free.

—Small, rural district in Idaho

Percentage of meals that are currently scratch cooked



Rural respondents were more likely to report scratch cooking a greater share of their meals than nonrural respondents. One in four (25%) rural respondents cook between 26-50% of their meals are scratch prepared versus 19% of nonrurals.

% of Meals Scratch Cooked	Rural	Nonrural
0%	4%	5%
1-10%	22%	26%
11-25%	27%	29%
26-50%	25%	19%
51-75%	13%	11%
76-100%	5%	3%

Respondents that participate in HSMFA were more likely to report scratch cooking a greater share of their meals than respondents that do not participate in HSMFA.

% of Meals Scratch Cooked	Participates in HSMFA	Does not participate in HSMFA
0%	5%	3%
1-10%	18%	31%
11-25%	28%	28%
26-50%	25%	20%
51-75%	14%	11%
76-100%	5%	4%

BARRIERS TO SCRATCH COOKING

The most commonly reported barriers to expanding scratch cooking were staff (64%) and funding (61%). Thirty-five percent (35%) of respondents reported equipment/facilities as a barrier to expanding scratch cooking and 23% reported access to ingredients/food. Five percent (5%) reported no barriers.

There were slight differences in barriers reported based on locality. Nonrural respondents were more likely to report equipment/facilities as a barrier (41% nonrural v. 31% rural). Rural respondents were more likely to report access to food/ingredients as a significant barrier (25% rural v. 19% nonrural).

These barriers are not mutually exclusive. Working with raw or minimally processed ingredients and shifting away from heat and serve methods requires additional staff time and training, upgraded or new equipment, potentially new facilities and more expensive ingredients—all of which requires additional investment.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND FACILITIES

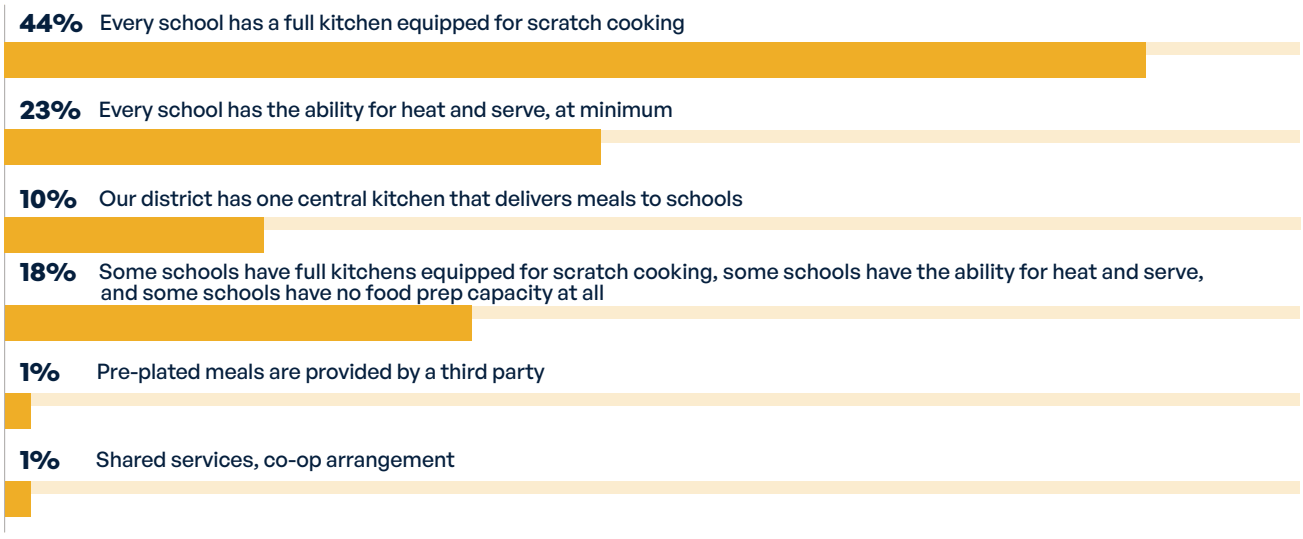
A key determinant for scratch cooking is the physical capacity that districts have through equipment and facilities. Not every school has a fully equipped kitchen capable of supporting scratch cooking. Some schools only have the capability for a preparation method referred to as "heat and serve," in which programs are limited to using fully cooked components that require little on-site preparation. Other districts may have one central kitchen that delivers meals to all schools. To date, there is a lack of national data documenting the variation of food service capacity across school districts. Our survey asked respondents to identify their food service structure.

Less than half (44%) of respondents reported that every school has a full kitchen equipped for scratch cooking. Almost a quarter (23%) of districts cited that every one of their schools at least have the ability to heat and serve meals and 18% of districts have a mix of kitchens that can prepare scratch meals and kitchens that can only heat and serve.

Another 10% of districts indicated that they have one central kitchen which prepares the food for students and delivers meals to schools. Most of the respondents that selected this option had fewer than 5,000 students. One central kitchen's capacity likely has limited capabilities for how many meals it could produce and deliver, which means this type of model may not practical or possible for many districts.

Put simply, 56% of respondents do not currently have the equipment or facilities necessary to scratch cook in every school. From this perspective, expanding scratch cooking would therefore require significant investment in kitchen infrastructure, equipment, and storage capacity. Districts may need to renovate existing facilities, purchase specialized equipment, and increase cold and dry storage space. For districts operating heat-and-serve kitchens or centralized production models, transitioning to more scratch preparation could require substantial operational changes and long-term capital investments.

District food service structure



Recommendations

School meal programs are facing significant financial and operational challenges. In many cases, insufficient investment is placing additional strain on district budgets and limiting their ability to strengthen meal quality and program operations. Districts are struggling to recruit and retain the workforce needed to prepare and serve meals, procure compliant products, and operate programs in a manner that meets federal nutrition standards while maintaining student participation. AASA strongly supports the national efforts to improve the quality of school meals, but any further changes must recognize the existing limitations of programs and provide the resources and time necessary to achieve these goals.

INCREASE FEDERAL REIMBURSEMENT RATES

Current federal reimbursement levels do not reflect the actual cost of operating school meal programs. Many districts reported that federal funding presents a moderate or significant challenge, and 40% indicated they diverted funding from other areas of their budgets to cover program costs. Increasing reimbursement rates would help districts maintain financially sustainable programs, offer competitive wages to hire and retain critical staff, improve meal quality and increase student participation.

PROVIDE FLEXIBILITY IN FEDERAL NUTRITION STANDARDS

District leaders strongly support serving healthy meals to students, but many report challenges balancing nutrition requirements with student acceptance, participation, staffing realities, product availability, and budget constraints. Federal policymakers should pursue solutions that recognize the variation in district circumstances and strengthen the capacity of local programs to provide nutritious, appealing meals to students.

INVEST IN SCHOOL MEAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND EQUIPMENT

The findings indicate that many districts lack the facilities and equipment necessary to expand scratch cooking or implement more labor-intensive meal preparation methods. While there is growing interest in increasing scratch cooking, only a minority of districts currently have the infrastructure to support it at scale. Federal investments in kitchen modernization, equipment upgrades, storage capacity, and facility improvements would help districts expand meal preparation options and better align with future nutrition goals.

SUPPORT POLICIES TO SERVE HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL

Districts that participate in HSMFA programs were more likely to have a greater percentage of their program costs covered by the federal reimbursement, more likely to report a greater share of their meals to be scratch cooked and less likely to report low student participation as a challenge. More broadly, HSMFA programs have been shown to improve student attendance, behavior and academic outcomes. Congress should support HSMFA programs and provide sufficient funding to ensure such policies do not create further financial challenges for school districts. Specifically, Congress can strengthen and expand CEP by increasing the multiplier from the current 1.6 to 2.5. This policy change would provide additional financial support to existing CEP districts and make it financially feasible for districts with lower ISPs to participate.

STRENGTHEN TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND PROCUREMENT SUPPORT

Many districts reported challenges related to procurement, supply chains, and product availability. As nutrition standards evolve, districts will need continued support in identifying compliant products and securing reliable access to ingredients. USDA should expand technical assistance, best-practice sharing, and procurement resources to help districts navigate supply chain disruptions and implement nutrition requirements more effectively.

RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION

The success of school meal programs depends on students choosing to eat the meals being served. Survey findings suggest that student acceptance and participation are closely tied to districts' ability to meet nutrition standards. Student participation is key to achieving the programs' goals of feeding students and improving student health, but it is also critical for the financial sustainability of programs.

Federal policymakers must balance the need for high nutritional value with the reality of the average student's palate. Changes to federal nutrition standards must consider student participation as a key measure of program success and ensure that future policy decisions support both nutritional quality and meal appeal. Meals that students do not consume cannot achieve their intended health or educational outcomes.

Conclusion

School meal programs ensure that every child is fed and ready to learn. Serving roughly 46 million meals a day, these programs represent an important opportunity to provide critical nutrition for America's children and help them build healthy habits for life.

Improving school meal programs and student health will require sustained financial investment and local flexibility to guarantee that every district is able to serve healthy foods that students enjoy. Without adequate federal support, districts face difficult budget decisions, including reducing funding for other priorities to absorb rising school meal costs or, in some cases, withdrawing from the federal school meals program altogether. AASA looks forward to continuing our work with Congress and the Administration to ensure federal policy and funding reflects the operational realities of school meal programs, and district leaders are not forced to choose supporting children in the classroom and feeding them.

Endnotes

1 Billings, K. C. (2025, April 21). School lunch and breakfast participation: A snapshot of recent trends (CRS Report No. R48515). Congressional Research Service. https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R48515

2 Food Research & Action Center. (2021). School meals are essential for student health and learning. https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/School-Meals-are-Essential-Health-and-Learning.pdf

3 Judith S. Bartfeld, Lawrence Berger, Fei Men and Yiyu Chen, "Access to the School Breakfast Program Is Associated with Higher Attendance and Test Scores Among Elementary School Students," The Journal of Nutrition 149, no. 2 (February 2019): 336-343, https://doi.org/10.1093/jn/nxy267

4 Spill MK, Trivedi R, Thoerig RC, Balalian AA, Schwartz MB, Gundersen C, Odoms-Young A, Racine EF, Foster MJ, Davis JS, MacFarlane AJ. Universal Free School Meals and School and Student Outcomes: A Systematic Review. JAMA Netw Open. 2024 Aug 1;7(8):e2424082. doi: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.24082. PMID: 39120904; PMCID: PMC11316229.

5 Healthy School Meals for All (HSMFA) programs provide free breakfast and lunch to all students regardless of family income.

6 Averages were calculated with the different reimbursement levels available for programs in the continuous states. Reimbursement varies based on location, percentage of low-income students and certification of performance-based assistance. It should be noted that the average reimbursement for schools in Alaska, Hawaii, Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands is much higher than the average listed here.

7 AASA, The School Superintendents Association, & Association of School Business Officials International. (2026). *Rising premiums, falling opportunities: The budgetary impact of health care costs on school districts.* https://www.aasa.org/docs/default-source/resources/reports/rising-premiums-health-care-costs-report.pdf

8 This includes students from households that receive benefits from Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or the Food Distribution Program for Indian Reservations (FDPIR), and in most states, Medicaid benefits, as well as children who are certified for free meals without an application because they are unhoused, migrant, enrolled in Head Start, or in foster care.

9 Food Research & Action Center. (n.d.). Healthy school meals for all. https://frac.org/healthy-school-meals-for-all

10 Alexis Bylander, Crystal FitzSimons, and Clarissa Hayes, The State of Healthy School Meals for All: California, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont Lead the Way (Food Research & Action Center, 2024), https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/HSMFA-Report-2024.pdf.