



“Back to School” During a Pandemic: Why Our Children Need Access to Nutritious Food to Learn and Thrive

Every year, millions of children depend on child nutrition programs to stay fed and healthy.

Child nutrition programs help our nation's children get the food they need to learn, grow, and thrive—especially children in low-income households. [More than half of all public school students](#) rely on free- or reduced-price school meals. Last year, [22 million children received free-or reduced-price school lunches](#), which means household income has to be below 130 percent of the federal poverty line and no more than 185 percent, respectively. For these children, school lunch and breakfast can make up as much as [58 percent of their daily caloric intake](#), meaning these children consume the *majority* of the food they need each day at school. These federally funded programs provide free and low-cost meals to millions of students each day. The largest federal programs, [the National School Lunch Program \(NSLP\)](#) and [the School Breakfast Program \(SBP\)](#) serve children nutritious meals at school every week day.

- **The National School Lunch Program (NSLP)** provides federal reimbursements for each free, reduced-price, or full price lunch served in participating pre-K-12 schools. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2019, this program served [almost 30 million students](#) each day.
- **The School Breakfast Program (SBP)** provides federal reimbursements for each free, reduced-price, or full price breakfast served in participating pre-K-12 schools providing breakfast to school children ranging from 30 cents to two dollars per meal. In FY 2019, [14.8 million children](#) participated in the program daily.

A number of additional federally funded programs help feed children before school, after school, and in outside of school settings:

- **The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)** provides federal reimbursements for two meals and snacks each day served by nonprofit and community organizations during summer months. While eligibility varies tremendously between entities, nearly [3 million children](#) participated in the program each day in FY 2019.
- **The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)** provides federal reimbursements for one meal and snacks each day in child care centers, day care homes, and adult day care centers. In FY 2019, nearly [5 million children](#) participated in the program each day.
- **The CACFP At-Risk After School Meal Program** provides federal reimbursements for after-school supper and snacks served in predominantly low-income communities in after-school and child care settings. In FY 2019, [2.2 million children](#) participated in the program each day.
- **The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children program (WIC)** provides federal grants to states for supplemental, nutrient-rich foods as well as nutrition counseling and education and breastfeeding support. This program covers pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women and infants and children under five years old with incomes of up to 185 percent of the federal poverty line (FPL). In FY 2019, the program served [6.4 million individuals, including 3.3 million children](#).

Child nutrition programs alleviate poverty and hunger, [improve child health](#) and well-being, and strengthen [development and academic achievement](#). However, these programs utilize long-standing benefit and eligibility criteria and lengthy reimbursement processes that require providers to cover the costs up front and can be inflexible to the growing needs of children and families. This is particularly true during the current pandemic as factors including meal times, meal sites, and delivery are constantly shifting.

Many of these programs have been disrupted due to COVID-related school, child care, and afterschool closures, putting more children and families, especially children of color, at increased risk of hunger and financial strain.

Since the start of the pandemic, many child nutrition programs have been disrupted and as many as **1 in 7 (14 percent) of households with children are not getting enough to eat**, according to the August 2020 [Census Household Pulse Survey](#). Due to historic and systemic racism, children of color are going hungry at disproportionate rates and nearly [4 in 10 Black and Hispanic children](#) are now suffering from food insecurity. At the same time, record job losses have left many families with fewer resources to replace missed school meals, making it harder to keep food on the table at home. Children need healthy food to stay focused in the classroom, play outside, and succeed in both the short and long term.

Without action now, rising child hunger will devastate our children's development and community success for years to come.

While Congress and the USDA took modest steps to help child nutrition programs continue serving meals during the spring and summer, more action is needed as programs continue to struggle to reach and adequately feed all children in need.

In March, Congress increased funding and flexibility for child nutrition programs through several relief packages. Under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Congress:

- Provided an additional **\$500 million for WIC** through September 2021 and suspended the requirement that women and children must visit clinics in person to receive vital services;
- Created a new **Pandemic Electronic Benefits (P-EBT)** program that provides emergency food assistance to children who are no longer able to access free or reduced-price school meals due to school closures;
- Appropriated an additional **\$8.8 billion for child nutrition programs** to cover rising food costs and expand demonstration projects; and

- **Authorized USDA to suspend meal requirements** to allow schools, child care facilities, community organizations, and summer meal providers to serve children outside of group settings and regular hours, offer meal pick-up and delivery services, and permit parents and guardians to pick up meals for their children. USDA's authority to continue these waiver extensions expires on September 30, 2020.

However, even with this additional funding and flexibility during the historic school closures last spring, child nutrition programs reached only a fraction of the children previously served. Only [6 in 10 children](#) eligible for free or reduced price school meals received them this spring and summer. [Four in five school nutrition programs served fewer meals than normal last year](#) and the majority of schools served less than half the meals served in a typical year. While 95 percent of schools still offered meals during closures last spring, [less than half \(43 percent\) offered meals on all five weekdays and only a fifth \(21 percent\) regularly delivered them](#). The overwhelming majority of programs ([76 percent](#)) primarily offered "grab-and-go" meals via walk-up or drive-through sites, requiring families to travel to centralized locations to pick them up. For many families—particularly low-income and rural families—this proved inconvenient or impossible due to lack of transportation or inflexible work hours. As a result, many of the children who rely on free- or reduced-price meals have been unable to access them.

Similarly, the new **Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT)** program was created to provide money for households with children who usually receive free or reduced-price school meals at school to buy groceries when school is closed. Every state implemented this program and [issued benefits by mid-summer](#), all while facing significant challenges while schools were closed and many state agencies were working remotely. New [research](#) from the Brookings Institute indicates that while food insecurity is still very high, on average, the P-EBT program helped reduce food hardship by 30 percent for the lowest-income households with children and lifted 2.7 to 3.9 million children out of hunger. However, challenges remain with ensuring that all children benefit. The youngest and poorest children were denied benefits entirely. Currently, children under six who are enrolled through the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and children in households receiving maximum monthly SNAP benefits—often those with the lowest income—are

ineligible for P-EBT assistance because Congress has not extended P-EBT to these children.

With participation falling and costs rising, many schools are struggling to stay afloat and sustain operations. Even before the pandemic, most school meal programs operated at cost or at a deficit. On average, [school breakfast and lunch programs rely on revenue to cover 97 percent of expenses](#). In the wake of this pandemic, [two-thirds of school districts project deficits](#) for the 2019-2020 school year and only a third of schools have sufficient reserve funds to be able to cover the financial loss. While the Families First Act provided some additional funding to support school nutrition programs, these funds can only be used to reimburse the cost of meals actually served--not offset revenue losses. Schools urgently need additional, unrestricted financial relief to help mitigate losses they have experienced and will continue to experience this fall.

Now, as many schools struggle to reopen and provisions are set to expire, millions more children could be left hungry this year.

Challenges schools faced last year will continue into 2021, but many of the recently created flexibilities will not. While all 50 states and the District of Columbia are operating the P-EBT program, it has not been extended past September 30th in law. The [Fiscal Year 2021 Continuing Resolution](#) (H.R. 8337) included an extension of the program to 2021 school year. If the bill is not signed into law, millions of children could lose access to the average benefit of \$5.70 per day, per student.

Moreover, the USDA has not extended through 2021 all of the waivers previously available to school, child care and afterschool meal providers. The USDA extended the non-congregate, meal service time, meal pattern flexibility, and parent pick-up waivers for the 2020-2021 school year. However, the USDA only extended the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) waivers that help serve children, including those young children under five and families who might not be enrolled in the program, in the most accessible locations through December 2020. The recently released House Continuing Resolution (H.R. 8337) also includes an extension of the **waiver authority to extend all child nutrition programs, including the SFSP and SSO**

waivers through the entire 2021 school year. The waiver authority was set to expire on September 30th, and without it, even more children would be left without the free- or low-cost school meals that help reduce hunger. Schools and communities should have all the tools and resources they need to continue to feed children remotely, conveniently, and safely during this crisis.

Congress must immediately expand child nutrition programs to ensure all children can stay fed this school year.

Providers need additional funding and flexibility to sustain operations and children need additional assistance to supplement lost meals. The HEROES Act—passed by the House in May but yet to be brought to a vote in the Senate—includes a number of critical improvements to child nutrition programs. Any forthcoming COVID relief package must:

- **Provide emergency relief for school nutrition programs and higher reimbursement rates for meals served during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years.** Many school meal programs and schools are incurring additional costs to transport and package food, but losing revenue as participation decreases. To sustain these essential feeding programs and prevent further cuts in education budgets, Congress must provide additional funding to cover their operating costs during the pandemic.
- **Increase funding for the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)** to help child care centers continue to serve free- or reduced- price meals and cover rising operating costs.
- **Extend the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program through FY 2021 and expand P-EBT to cover young children under six** as proposed in the Ensuring Nutrition for America's Students Act to ensure children can continue to access food until schools, preschools and child care programs can safely reopen or if they are forced to close due to another outbreak.
- **Increase funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)**, raise the value of the WIC Cash Value Voucher (CVV) to \$35 per month for women and children throughout the duration of the public health crisis, ensure waivers are extended that provide flexibility for in-person visits, and ensure participants can purchase groceries online.

To build on these critical improvements and further reduce administrative burdens for school nutrition programs during the 2020-2021 school year, **Congress and the USDA should also allow schools to offer all students meals at no charge as outlined by the [Pandemic Child Hunger Prevention Act \(H.R. 7887\)](#).**

This critical bill would allow *all* children, regardless of income eligibility and enrollment, to have school breakfast, lunch, and afterschool snacks as “grab and go” and delivery options. Our school meals can be cumbersome and restrictive given the growing needs and family income fluctuations during a crisis. With unemployment and poverty rates on the rise, many children will become newly eligible for free or reduced-price school meals this fall and next spring. Providing free meals to all students will eliminate the financial and administrative burden of processing new applications and help school meal programs recover from losses incurred this year.

After COVID-19, Congress must take additional steps to help children thrive and flourish in school by providing more nutrition assistance, not less.

In the long-term, Congress must also take steps to permanently address shortcomings in our child nutrition programs to ensure all children have the healthy, nutritious food they need to live, grow, and thrive. Only a fraction of children who receive free- or reduced-price meals during a traditional school year receive meals after school, on weekends, and over the summer. Many children whose families struggle to put food on the table do not qualify for free school meals because eligibility is restricted to children below 130 percent of the federal poverty line and 185 percent of the federal poverty line for reduced-priced meals.

To close these gaps and ensure children have enough nutritious food at all ages and all times of year, Congress must:

- **Provide free school, afterschool and summer meals to every child, as proposed under the [Universal School Meals Program Act \(H.R. 4684 & S. 2609\)](#).** This bill would ensure that every child has access to free meals and would help stop lunch shaming and the stigmatization of childhood poverty. Right now, many families and children who are struggling do not qualify for school lunch and breakfast programs, even though they may not be able to afford meals. This bill would alleviate the burden and costs of having families fill out

applications to prove they are worthy enough for their children to eat a healthy meal.

- **Strengthen and expand the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) as proposed in the [Access to Healthy Food for Young Children Act of 2019 \(S. 2501\)](#).** This bill would allow full-day child care providers to serve an additional snack or meal; raise meal reimbursement rates by 10 cents to improve nutrition and participation; broaden area eligibility to include child care centers in communities where 40 percent of children are eligible for free or reduced price school meals; and establish a CACFP Community Eligibility pilot program to allow child care centers to participate in CACFP without burdensome income applications or enrollment forms.
- **Extend WIC eligibility as proposed in the [Wise Investment in Children Act of 2019 \(S. 2358\)](#)** for children up to six years old to ensure continuity in nutrition programs as they enter school, and extend the certification period for infants and postpartum women to two years. This would ensure 600,000 children maintain access to WIC's power to provide health child development, nutrition, and positive birth outcomes.
- **Establish a permanent Summer EBT program as proposed in the [Stop Child Summer Hunger Act \(H.R. 3378 & S. 1941\)](#)** that is properly scaled and funded to ensure every child eligible for free or reduced-price meals during the school year can access meals during the summer months. Summer EBT pilots have proven effective at reducing food insecurity in the summer and improving child outcomes for children.
- **Provide more robust emergency services to improve school and community response** to a future crisis by permanently expanding grab-and-go options, delivery options, community drop spots, and prioritizing accessibility for families in the community wherever they are.
- **Establish consistent and reliable data** on the number of children who are fed, by socioeconomic and racial categories, and gaps in services to better coordinate delivery and the targeting of resources in communities.