

# Improving Child Nutrition Programs

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All students deserve healthy, nutritious school meals that will prepare them to learn and place them on the path to success. Providing meals to all students at no cost to them improves their health as well as their classroom performance; eliminates the stigma of student meal debt; and relieves schools of complicated and burdensome paperwork. The pandemic has demonstrated that schools and school food service professionals can provide meals to students in all communities, under difficult circumstances. We must build on this accomplishment with a robust response to childhood hunger that ensures our students have a solid foundation for learning and health. **Universal/healthy school meals for all** is NEA's long-term goal for improving child nutrition, and can be accomplished via legislation such as the Universal School Meals Program Act (S. 1530/H.R. 3115).

## What can we do to increase and improve access while we are working toward universal school meals?

### Child Nutrition Reauthorization should:

#### EXPAND AND IMPROVE ACCESS TO SCHOOL MEALS

- ▶ Increase the number of high-poverty schools eligible to offer free meals to all students via the **Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)** by increasing the multiplier from 1.6 to 2.5, and creating a statewide option, as proposed.
- ▶ **Reduce/eliminate school meal debt to eliminate stigma**, and direct USDA to set a standard policy, including a requirement that communications be directed to parents and guardians, to ensure children are not stigmatized for being unable to pay for school meals. NEA supports the No Shame at School Act (S. 4602/H.R. 8477).
- ▶ Increase the number of low-income students who are **directly certified for free school meals** without an application and ensure that any changes to the process of verifying eligibility do not cause eligible children to lose school meal benefits or increase administrative burdens for schools.
- ▶ **Increase reimbursement rates and other supports for school meals** to help meet labor, food, and supply costs. NEA supports the LUNCHES Act (H.R. 6743) and the Healthy Breakfasts Help Kids Learn Act (H.R. 6718).

#### SUPPORT SCHOOL FOOD SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

- ▶ Include ongoing **professional development and training** for school food service staff at no cost, during regular, paid working hours, and maximize hands-on training. These improvements are included in the NEA-supported Improving Training for School Food Service Workers Act (S. 1834/H.R. 2897).
- ▶ **Update kitchen equipment and infrastructure** in order to prepare and serve healthy meals in a cost-effective, efficient manner. Include expanded grants and low- and no-interest loans for school kitchen equipment and infrastructure, and technical assistance to school districts for upgrading their kitchen facilities. NEA supports the School Food Modernization Act (S. 876/H.R. 4379).
- ▶ **Protect school food service professionals from the impacts of attempts to privatize meals programs.** Service institutions should be prohibited from entering into contracts with food service management companies that seek to avoid, undermine, or are in violation of collective bargaining agreements.

#### MAINTAIN HEALTHY GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOL MEALS

- ▶ Maintain and fully implement the **science-based nutrition standards for school meals** and other child nutrition programs in the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act that are improving student health. According to the USDA, students who participate in these programs consume breakfasts and lunches of higher nutritional quality and are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables than students who do not participate in the programs.
- ▶ Provide resources to expand **scratch cooking of nutritious meals in schools.** NEA supports the Scratch Cooked Meals for Kids Act (H.R. 6608), which provides grants for professional development, equipment, compensation, and student engagement.

## EXPAND ACCESS TO OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME AND OTHER CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS

- ▶ **Increase access to quality summer food and other out-of-school time programs connected to educational, enrichment, and recreational activities** so more low-income children can receive meals during the summer and after school. NEA supports the Summer Meals Act (S. 1170/ H.R. 783), which **improves area eligibility**, allows sites to serve three meals a day, and allows providers to serve meals seamlessly throughout the year.
- ▶ Provide **Summer EBT benefits** to children who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals when schools are closed (e.g., during the summer, extended school breaks, and unexpected school closures). This will build upon the successes of the Summer EBT pilots and the Pandemic EBT program. NEA supports the Stop Child Hunger Act (S. 1831/ H.R. 3519).
- ▶ **Expand and strengthen the Farm to School Grant Program** that helps schools procure local foods for schools meals and supports local activities such as school gardens and hands-on learning. NEA supports the Farm to School Act (S. 1328/ H.R. 1768).

## ENSURE STRONG MECHANISMS FOR EMERGENCY RESPONSE

- ▶ Ensure USDA's ability to help schools and other program providers respond quickly and flexibly to any pandemic resurgences and other emergencies so that children continue to receive nutritious meals.