

Child Nutrition Reauthorization



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Our nation’s child nutrition programs play a critical role in fighting hunger, promoting health and wellness, and preparing students to learn. The National Education Association (NEA) recommends building on the successes of the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFK) by ensuring reauthorization of child nutrition programs that include the following priorities.

Protecting Community Eligibility for Universal School Meals

The Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act improved access for children to crucial school meals through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). More than 18,000 schools in high-poverty areas nationwide now offer breakfast and lunch at no charge to all students without collecting and processing individual school meal applications. The House Education and Workforce Committee majority has proposed to cut the program by changing the current threshold from 40% to 60% of students identified as eligible—pushing more than 7,000 schools and 3.4 million students off of CEP. These schools would have to return to burdensome eligibility verification requirements; and many of these students who had been receiving meals without stigma or co-pay, may no longer be able to participate in the school meals programs, and could experience hunger and undernutrition, preventing them from being ready to learn in the classroom each day.

Ensuring Verification Process Works for Schools and Students

Both the House bill and the bill passed by the Senate Agriculture Committee significantly increase the number of free and reduced-price school meals applications to be directly verified by schools. This could lead to eligible children losing benefits and create a significant administrative burden for many schools at the same time that they are beginning to implement the newly-passed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA); the addition of so many schools potentially losing access to CEP only compounds this problem. This plan should be scaled back, or at a minimum phased in, with these additional local responsibilities in mind, and allow significant time to be implemented successfully. While the House proposal does allow time for implementation, we remain concerned about the overall impact of the increase in verification on schools and students.

Maintaining Healthy Nutrition Guidelines for School Meals

Maintaining the healthy guidelines set by the HHFK for school meals is a priority for NEA. These nutrition standards have had widespread, positive impacts on children’s access to healthy foods during the school day. In fact, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports that over 95 percent of schools are successfully meeting the updated nutrition standards that reduce sugar, sodium and fat, and increase the intake of fruits and vegetables. While the Senate bill largely preserves the nutrition standards, and the House proposal maintains some of them, it contains troubling provisions around sodium standards, and undercuts nutrition standards in snack and meal items served à la carte.

Training and Supporting School Food Service Professionals

The NEA members who are school food service professionals prepare school meals, maintain a safe and healthy learning environment, and help students learn about and practice healthy nutrition and eating habits. We strongly support the continued inclusion of ongoing professional development and training that is provided to food service managers and staff at no cost, during regular, paid working hours; and maximizes hands-on training where appropriate. Both the House and Senate proposals take steps forward on these issues.

Providing Adequate Equipment and Infrastructure

Schools need updated kitchen equipment and infrastructure in order to serve healthy meals in a cost-effective manner. Reauthorization should include significant financial support for school kitchen equipment and infrastructure in the form of both grants and low- and no-interest loans, and technical assistance to school districts in upgrading their kitchen facilities. Both the House and Senate bills contain assistance programs for kitchen equipment.