



# Child Nutrition Reauthorization

March 2022

**C**ongress has an important opportunity in 2022 to improve the health of millions of our nation's children by passing a strong reauthorization bill that strengthens, expands, and protects child nutrition programs. These successful, cost-effective federal nutrition programs play a critical role in helping children in low-income families get access to child care, as well as to educational and enrichment activities while improving their overall nutrition, health, development, and academic achievement.

Congress must enact a child nutrition reauthorization bill that strengthens program access and supports participation by underserved children, ensures nutrition quality, and simplifies program administration and operation. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of the federal child nutrition programs, and several policy improvements that were made during COVID-19 should be implemented permanently by Congress. The reauthorization also should build on the critical gains — which improved access and nutrition — that were made in the last reauthorization.

## Out-of-School Time Programs

The afterschool and summer nutrition programs provide meals and snacks at schools, parks, recreation centers, nonprofit organizations, and other sites, often combining meals with educational, enrichment, and physical activities. To qualify, these sites must be located in a low-income community or serve primarily children living in low-income households. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of ensuring access to nutritious meals when schools are closed. The upcoming reauthorization should prioritize

increasing access to summer and afterschool nutrition. The bill should make the following investments:

- increase the reach of, and the benefits provided through, the summer meals programs;
- improve area eligibility requirements so that more communities are able to provide summer and afterschool meals;
- streamline program operations to reduce unnecessary red tape;
- build upon the success of the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) program, and provide Summer EBT benefit 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); and
- provide the opportunity to reach children through alternative delivery models that proved to be critical during the pandemic, especially in areas with limited access to summer meals.

## Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

CACFP provides healthy meals and snacks that support good nutrition, help children fully develop, and prepare them to be ready to learn at school. CACFP also provides high-quality, affordable child care that supports parents' ability to work. Unfortunately, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, CACFP meals and snacks were out of reach for millions of young children in child care.

The reauthorization bill has the potential to address this problem by making these key improvements:

- allow a much-needed CACFP afternoon snack or supper for children in full-day child care;
- streamline access for parents and providers;
  - allow annual eligibility for proprietary centers;
  - maximize technology to improve program access (including increasing the use of CACFP direct certification and creating community eligibility options);
  - improve the area eligibility test to reach family child care providers in rural and other low-income areas;
- increase program reimbursements for CACFP providers and sponsors;
- continue funding for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) CACFP nutrition education; and
- extend the COVID-19 expansion by allowing young adults up to 24 years old to be eligible to receive up to three healthy meals at homeless and youth-serving shelters.

## National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program

The National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program provide nutritious meals to millions of children across the country and play an important role in reducing hunger, improving nutrition, and supporting learning. Access to school meals will be critical as students recover from the educational and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as schools work to overcome the learning loss experienced by millions of children due to pandemic-related school closures.

During the pandemic, schools have been able to offer nutritious meals to all students at no charge, which increases access for children living in low-income households, improves the school's environment, eliminates unpaid school meals debt, and reduces administrative work for school districts. This approach should be continued throughout the pandemic and beyond.

The reauthorization should take a number of steps, including what's listed below, to ensure access to both school meals programs, strengthen the programs, increase the number of children eligible for meals at no charge, and allow more schools to offer nutritious, meals to all students at no charge:

- expand community eligibility, which offers an important mechanism to increase the number of high-poverty schools that offer free breakfast and lunch to all students;
- leverage additional opportunities to directly certify children living in low-income households for free school meals; for example, allow children who have been impacted by the opioid and drug crisis to receive school meals at no charge, and increase the number of states using Medicaid data; and
- take steps to ensure that the school cafeteria is a positive environment for all students, and to reduce the accumulation of unpaid school meals debt.

## Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

WIC provides pregnant and postpartum mothers, infants, and young children living in low-income households nutritious foods and nutrition education. The bill should increase access to WIC, which these recommendations address:

- extend certification periods to two years for infants and postpartum women, and enrollment for children until their sixth birthday;
- make permanent the flexibilities that allow for remote enrollment, services, and benefit issuance, and facilitating online ordering;
- expand WIC research in underserved communities; and
- maintain the scientific integrity of the WIC food package process as USDA undertakes the congressionally mandated 10-year cycle revision.