



## Urgent Child Nutrition Investments Needed in the Next Legislation Passed by Congress

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**T**he pandemic has highlighted the importance of the child nutrition programs in keeping hunger at bay for millions of children across the country. These programs also have been crucial to mitigating the economic, educational, and health impacts of the pandemic.

The next pandemic relief legislation passed by Congress must ensure that children can access the healthy food they need through child nutrition programs, including at school and during the summer. The following three provisions designed to support economic recovery and provide pandemic relief recently came close to being enacted and now must be included in the next piece of legislation.

### Extend the Child Nutrition Waivers

Congress gave the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) the authority to issue nationwide child nutrition waivers through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020. These waivers have allowed school nutrition programs, local government agencies, and nonprofit organizations to keep feeding children in the face of the numerous challenges the pandemic created.

A recent USDA report found that about 92 percent of school food authorities reported supply chain challenges in SY 2021-2022, with the public, larger, and rural school food authorities being more likely to report they are struggling. Nearly three in four school food authorities reported staffing challenges.

### Expand Community Eligibility

Community eligibility has transformed school breakfast and lunch for children, families, and schools. Eligible schools that adopt community eligibility offer free school breakfast and lunch to all students, which reduces paperwork for schools and families, eliminates unpaid school meal fees, and fuels health and learning. Currently, too many high-

need schools are not eligible even though they and their students stand to benefit from community eligibility. For schools that are eligible, the reimbursement structure can keep them from adopting community eligibility. Congress should lower the eligibility threshold to make more schools eligible to implement community eligible and increase the funding (raising the multiplier from 1.6 to 2.5)<sup>1</sup> as proposed in H.R. 5376 so that more schools are able to implement community eligibility.

### Create a Nationwide Summer EBT Program

When schools close for the summer break, families lose access to healthy free or reduced-price school meals for their children. The result is increased food insecurity among families with children. This has been happening during the pandemic and it happens every summer. The existing summer nutrition programs are designed to replace school meals and often support much-needed summer programming. But the reach of these meals is too low. Prior to the pandemic the summer nutrition programs served just one child for every seven who count on free or reduced-price school meals during the school year. A nationwide Summer EBT program would provide families an EBT card to purchase food when schools are closed. This approach is included in H.R. 5376 and H.R. 3519/S. 1831. Evaluations of Summer EBT demonstrations have found that they reduce food insecurity and improve nutrition.

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<sup>1</sup>For community eligibility, the percentage of Identified Students—those who are certified for free school meals without an application, such as children whose households participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—currently is multiplied by 1.6 to determine the percentage of meals reimbursed at the free rate. For example, a school at 40% Identified Students would be reimbursed for 64% of the meals at the free rate and 36% of the meals at the paid rate. If the multiplier is raised to 2.5, the school would receive the free rate for all meals.