

IMPROVING SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM

National PTA recognizes that proper nutrition is imperative to the health, development and academic achievement of children. On average, a child will consume about one-third to one-half of their daily calories during the school day. It's therefore critical that federal school meals programs be adequately funded, and modernized to improve access to high-quality, nutritious school meals for all children.

Food insecurity is linked to lower reading and math scores, falling behind peers academically and socially, and may lead to increased risk of behavioral issues, such as anxiety, hyperactivity and aggression. Additionally, eating breakfast at school is associated with better attendance rates, fewer missed school days, and better test scores.

The USDA National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Child and Adult Food Care Program, Summer Food Service Program, and Afterschool Meal & Snack Service, provide important nutritional and financial support to students and families. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, each school day, almost 30 million children participated in the National School Lunch Program and almost 15 million participated in the School Breakfast Program.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic there has been an increase in food insecurity, persistent workforce shortages, and supply chain issues. Child nutrition waivers issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) during the 2020-2022 school years helped reduce child hunger by increasing school meal participation and played a critical role in supporting school nutrition operations.

Research shows that students who participate in the school meal programs consume more whole grains, milk, fruits, and vegetables during meal times and have better overall diet quality, than nonparticipants. However, over the past few decades food served in school meals has become increasingly more processed (heat-and-serve) with less locally prepared whole foods. Concurrently, obesity rates and diet-related conditions such as type 2 diabetes¹ have increased in both children and teenagers.

Proper nutrition, adequate physical activity, and supporting families in finding healthy meal options is the cornerstone of a child's health, well-being and development.

National PTA supports and advocates for legislation and wellness policies which:

- Include measurable goals and best practices regarding child nutrition with definitions for locally grown, scratch, and speed scratch cooking.
- Ensure sufficient time for students to receive a meal, at least 20 minutes to consume a meal, and a recess or break opportunity.
- Increase procurement and processing of locally grown foods, and farm to school programs.
- Expand use of whole, fresh and/or minimally processed ingredients and scratch-cooked meals through funding programs that modernize school kitchen equipment and provide training for school nutrition staff.

- Provide flexibility to prepare and serve meals that recognize diverse student dietary needs and cultural or regional cuisine preferences.
- Provide flexibility such as allowing multi-day grab-and go meal options during school breaks including over the summer months.
- Support the inclusion of students, parents and school-based staff in the development, implementation, and evaluation of school wellness and school meal programs

National PTA strongly opposes the meal debt policies that shame or humiliate students—or prevent children from receiving a full meal equivalent to their peers.

The USDA Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) enables high poverty schools and school divisions to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students in a qualifying school. Additionally, the CEP program eliminates school meal debt, reduces paperwork, and streamlines school meal operations by eliminating the need to collect and process school meal applications and school meal payment.

National PTA supports legislation that requires eligible schools to participate in the CEP program. National PTA also supports federal and state funding programs that implement Universal Free School Meals for all students, regardless of income levels.

Adopted by the 2023 National PTA Board of Directors

¹ <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/rates-new-diagnosed-cases-type-1-type-2-diabetes-rise-among-children-teens>

<https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/pdfs/data/statistics/national-diabetes-statistics-report.pdf>

[https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2783420?guestAccessKey=86b21242-9016-4399-9615-10f2d00d259c&utm_source=For The Media&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ftm_links&utm_content=tfl&utm_term=082421](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2783420?guestAccessKey=86b21242-9016-4399-9615-10f2d00d259c&utm_source=For%20The%20Media&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ftm_links&utm_content=tfl&utm_term=082421)