

Child Nutrition Reauthorization Priorities – 117th Congress

*Prioritizing Access and Improving
Dietary Quality with Fresh Fruits
and Vegetables*



RECOMMENDATION #1:

Expand the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) to all elementary schools that qualify under the Community Eligible Provision, and maintain the program as “fresh only”

Congress established FFVP to help provide low-income children exposure to a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables they might not otherwise have access to at home or school by serving a fresh fruit or vegetable snack daily in the classroom (or, as extra portions at home during COVID-19 emergency feeding). About 7,600 elementary schools now participate in the program, out of 67,000 elementary schools nationwide. Each year, demand outpaces available funding and many deserving schools that take the time to apply cannot participate through no fault of their own. Additionally, within many school districts, not all elementary schools will qualify based on only a nominal difference in free and reduced price percentages – causing inequities throughout school districts and missing students who really need it. Expanding to all CEP-eligible elementary schools would improve dietary quality for all students, reduce stigma, and ease administrative application burden on schools.

In addition to expanding access, FFVP should also remain fresh. With more than 95% of USDA commodities available to schools being canned, dried, frozen, or juiced, FFVP is critical to providing access to fresh produce. Evaluation data have shown that consumption increases when the program is exclusively fresh, and when opened up to “all forms” – consumption throughout the school day decreases.

RECOMMENDATION #2:

Apply a cash value benefit to fruits and vegetables to Out of School EBT

Out of School EBT, including Summer and Pandemic-EBT, is an important resource to ensure that children have access to meals when school is out of session – be it a public or natural emergency or over extended summer break. With the desire to expand EBT to all students during the summer, it will be critically important to ensure that children have the same access to fruits and vegetables at home as they do through school meals. Providing an evidence-based cash value benefit for produce (modeled after WIC) can help meet this goal and drive local demand for fresh produce in areas that have historically struggled to provide retail access to healthy foods.



RECOMMENDATION #3:

Expand the pool of eligible emergency food distribution sites to include schools and other childcare and youth-serving organizations that participate in USDA feeding programs.

The distribution of fresh produce boxes through the Farmers to Families program in 2020 and 2021 highlighted the important role that schools, nonprofits, and other youth-serving agencies play in supporting families' well-being, particularly in crisis. Congress and USDA should identify ways to continue fresh produce procurement programs and prioritize schools and other youth-serving distribution sites to help families meet fruit and vegetable recommendations consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

RECOMMENDATION #4:

Ensure all children can access healthy meals at no charge to the student

The COVID-19 emergency resulted in schools being able to temporarily serve meals free to all students, which has proven to be an effective tool at increasing access to nutrition, minimizing administrative paperwork for schools, and reducing stigma and student meal debt. Despite its fundamental role, food remains one of the last resources in public school that students must pay for out of pocket. A recent study found that school meals are the healthiest food children will access all day. Given the nation's obesity and overweight epidemic, it is time to embed school meals as part of the school day and make school meals available free to all.

RECOMMENDATION #5:

Expand WIC benefits to age 6

The Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is one of the strongest tools USDA has in addressing food and nutrition insecurity, including access to fresh fruits and vegetables through its cash value benefit program. Expanding WIC benefits to age six would cover an existing gap between WIC and kindergarten age, ensuring that children would have access to a nutritious food package until they reach a school setting.

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RECOMMENDATION #6:

Make permanent USDA School Kitchen Equipment Grants and reduce the threshold to \$1,000

Ninety percent of schools need at least one piece of updated school kitchen equipment, and costs attributed to COVID-19 meal service have only exacerbated this challenge. Additionally, data show that slicing whole produce and providing options through a grab-and-go line are effective strategies to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables. Congress has recognized this need for nearly a decade by providing annual appropriations for USDA School Kitchen Equipment Grants. These grants should be made permanent as laid out in the School Food Modernization Act.

RECOMMENDATION #7:

Adequate Time to Eat and Meal Time Study

The time of day and length of time students have to eat has been an issue schools have faced for years. The negative implications of rushed and ill-timed lunch periods contribute to plate waste with students not having adequate time to eat the nutritious foods on their tray, including items like whole fruits and vegetables that may take longer to chew and eat. Additionally, during the pandemic, many schools have served meals outside the cafeteria and may have data to share on how this practice has positively or negatively impacted meal times. Accordingly, Congress should fund a meal time study that results in dissemination of best practices to schools on adequate time to eat, as laid out in the Healthy Meal Time Act.

