Policy Statement on School Nutrition
June 2020

Background

Each day in the United States, nearly 30 million students receive lunch through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP),[1] and more than 14 million students receive breakfast through the School Breakfast Program (SBP).[2] These numbers include all participating children whether they receive free, reduced-price, or full-price meals. The NSLP is the nation's second largest food and nutrition assistance program, after the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In fiscal year 2019, school cafeterias served nearly five billion lunches,[3] operating in nearly 100,000 public and nonprofit private schools (grades K to 12) and residential childcare institutions.[4]

The NSLP and SBP are essential nutrition assistance programs in the United States. The majority of student participants are from under-resourced families—71 percent of NSLP participants and 85 percent of SBP participants receive free or reduced-price meals, which are determined by their household income.[5] The NSLP provides reduced-price or free lunches to nearly 22 million children daily,[1] and the SBP provides reduced-price or free breakfasts to more than 12 million children daily.[2] Participation among students receiving free meals has dramatically increased in the past decade (from 15.4 million children in 2008 to 20 million children in 2019)

for competitive foods and beverages sold in schools could potentially prevent more than 340,000 cases of childhood obesity by 2025 if children do not compensate by increasing food intake outside of school.[12] In particular, applying standards to foods sold outside of meal programs (Smart Snacks) could lead to costs savings of nearly $800 million.[12]

In December 2018, the USDA finalized a rule to roll back some of the requirements for school nutrition standards, including delaying the second phase of sodium reduction to the SY 2024-25 school year, eliminating the third and final phase of sodium reduction, weakening the whole grain standards by requiring half of grain servings to be whole grain-rich, and expanding allowable flavored milk to include low-fat milk when under the previous rule flavored milk could only be fat-free.[13] This rule was overturned in federal court in April 2020

meal.[17] A nationally representative survey of elementary school administrators and food service staff found that in 2012–2013, just after the updated nutrition standards for meals took effect, 70 percent agreed that students liked the new lunches.[18] A national poll conducted by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in 2015 found that 86 percent of the public supported the updated nutrition standards and 86 percent said the nutrition requirements should stay the same or be strengthened.[19]

The rapid health impact assessment published by Healthy Eating Research found that USDA's 2020 proposed changes to school nutrition standards would negatively affect the quality of children's diets who consume school meals and competitive foods and increase the risk that students fall into food insecurity. In addition, the health impact assessment found rolling back the nutrition standards could impact student academic performance and learning, especially among Hispanic and black children and those from under resourced communities, who rely most on school foods.[28] The health impact assessment also found that there is strong evidence showing that nutrition standards affect students' participation in school meal programs and school food service revenue. Stronger nutrition standards increase the likelihood of a student's participation in school meal programs, thus increasing food service revenue.[29] In summary, the changes to nutrition changes would affect children's diets and their health, school meal participation, and school revenue.

Policy recommendations

- Maintain robust school nutrition standards for meals and competitive foods to ensure the health and wellbeing for all children, esc(i)-1.4 (n r)1.5 (o)1 (b)-2.7 (u)-5.7 (s)4.4 (t)0.5 (s)4.4 (c)-3.9 (ho)1 (o)11

information on added sugars available on the Nutrition Facts label. In contrast, the updated Nutrition Facts label, which went into effect January 1, 2020 for manufacturers with $10 million or more in annual food sales,[§] now includes information on added sugars along with a percent Daily Value. Having added sugars on the Nutrition Facts label makes it significantly easier for programs to comply with an added sugars standard. Moreover, setting an added sugars limit in school meals and competitive foods could encourage industry innovation to reformulate and reduce the added sugars in common foods served and sold in schools.

Policy Recommendation:

- Include a limit for added sugars in the school nutrition standards (meals and competitive foods).

In an effort to expand program participation, USDA is piloting different ways of delivering SFSP benefits to eligible families. A pilot has been in place to offer additional resources to families whose children receive free or reduced-price meals during the school year through the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (Summer EBT). While it is ideal to offer meals along with educational, recreational, or enrichment programming, like with traditional SFSP sites, Summer EBT helps children access food even when programming is not available. Because this is still in the pilot phase, Summer EBT currently only reaches a small number of children. Under the 2011 and 2012 pilot model, families with children who receive free or reduced-price lunch received either a $60 or $30 monthly benefit following either a SNAP model or WIC model. With the SNAP model, families can purchase any SNAP eligible foods. Under the WIC model, families were authorized to redeem specified quantities of WIC approved foods in eight categories and up to a specified dollar value of qualifying fruits and vegetables.[52]

When comparing the $60 benefit to no benefit, the reduction in food security was substantively large and statistically significant. The benefit decreased the prevalence of the most severe food insecurity among children by one-third and reduced the prevalence of food insecurity overall among children by nearly a fifth. The impact of the $30 benefit was about half that of the $60 benefit.[52]

Across all evaluations, Summer EBT improved dietary quality for most of the nutrition outcomes measured by the evaluation.[52] For most nutrition outcomes, there was a statistically significant increase for both the SNAP model and WIC model, but impact on children's nutrition with the WIC model was twice that of the SNAP model. The $30 benefit showed smaller improvements in diet quality compared to the $60 benefit.[52] Summer EBT should be expanded to all 50 states and when possible should follow the WIC model. Summer EBT could be particularly beneficial in rural areas where SFSP is more limited.

Policy Recommendation

- Support expanding the Summer Food Service Program and Summer EBT and update the Summer Food Service Program nutrition standards to align with the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

As part of the HHFKA, Congress created a universal meal option, the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), through which schools in underresourced communities can provide free meals to all students and do not need eligible students individually apply.[54] CEP was phased into a few states at a time before it was expanded nationwide in SY 2014–2015. During SY 2018–2019, 28,614 schools and 4,698 school districts participated in CEP, which enabled [illegible]

- Adopt universal meals and allow all students to receive free breakfast and lunch while in school.

SBP availability can reduce food insecurity among elementary school children.[58] Daily participation in SBP has been associated with higher diet quality over a 24-hour period—a cross sectional observation study conducted between 2013-2015 among 9-15 year old children, found that consuming school breakfast daily resulted in higher intakes of fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, and dietary fiber compared to students who did not eat school breakfast every day.[59] Students in 4th and 5th grade who participated in breakfast in the classroom had higher overall diet quality and did not have higher mean energy intakes from breakfast nor higher daily energy intakes than students who ate breakfast at home, in the cafeteria, or second chance breakfast.[60]

There are concerns that children participating in breakfast in the classroom are also eating a breakfast at home—thus consuming two breakfasts, which might cause them to gain weight. A longitudinal observational study of middle school students found that those who regularly consume breakfast at school were more likely to have a healthy weight trajectory, that weight changes from year to year were similar between students who consumed two breakfasts, and there were increased odds of overweight or obesity among frequent breakfast skippers compared with students who consumed breakfast.[61]

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Support Food Service Programs

According to the , when school nutrition professionals were asked to list challenges they encountered while implementing the new meal patterns they ranked staff training as a three on a five-point scale, indicating that it was a significant challenge.[15] All states report that they provide training and technical assistance on administrative practices to school food authorities. Almost all states report providing training on identification of reimbursable meals at the point of service (98 percent), nutrition and accuracy of approvals for free and reduced-priced meals (96 percent), and health and food safety standards (93 percent). More than three-quarters of states (78 percent) reported providing training on the efficient and effective use of USDA Foods (commodities).[89] While these trainings are important, they do not address the challenges cited by the USDA to justify rollbacks to the nutrition standards. A study analyzing qualitative interviews with food service directors found that targeted technical assistance at the federal, state, and local level could help with meeting the 2012 sodium, whole grain, and flavored milk standards.[90] A report from The Pew Charitable Trusts found that providing school food service team members with the training they need is a critical step in meeting the updated nutrition standards.[91] Increased funding for the Institute of Child Nutrition, as well as a robust training and technical assistance plan by the USDA on sodium and whole grains compliance, will help meet the needs of school food service programs.

Policy Recommendation

- Continue to increase support to provide nutritious, appealing meals through training and technical assistance.

One barrier to efficiently meeting the school meal standards is outdated infrastructure for food storage and preparation. Since 2009, when the first funds were authorized under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act as part of the infrastructure investment, the USDA has provided approximately $160 million in kitchen equipment grants.[92] Yet, three out of five school districts still report needing new equipment.[89] In 2013, 88 percent of schools reported needing at least one piece of kitchen equipment.[93] Many schools are preparing nutritious meals despite having inadequate facilities and tools. Instead, outdated kitchens and tools may cause them to rely on costly and inefficient "workarounds." Schools need facilities and equipment capable of cost-efficient cooking with healthier, fresher ingredients. Updated equipment could also help with food waste issues.[80]

One way that schools have been able to meet some infrastructure needs while increasing access to fruits and vegetables is the Salad Bars to Schools initiative. Salad Bars to Schools launched in 2010 with the mission of donating salad bars to U.S. schools to increase fruit and vegetable consumption.[94] An 2014 evaluation of the initiative found that salad bars were an effective strategy to increase student's fruit and vegetable intake, 78 percent

effective way to increase access and consumption of fruits and vegetables. In addition, state salad bars may lower food waste by allowing students to only take the items they want to consume.[96]

Policy Recommendation

- Increase investment in infrastructure through equipment grants and salad bars.

Schools need adequate funding to purchase, prepare, and serve healthy, quality foods. For the average school food authority (SFA), total revenues covered 97 percent of total reported costs, indicating that the average SFA operates at a small deficit.[15] The greatest challenge reported by SFAs in meeting the updated

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Appendix

The 2018 and 2020 efforts to weaken the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, and Smart Snack nutrition standards are harmful to students' health.

Sodium	The 2018 rollback would delay the second phase of sodium reduction to the 2024-25 school year and eliminate the third and final phase of sodium reduction. More than

	USDA has proposed revising this requirement and reducing the amount of red/orange and “other” vegetables that must be served each week. This change would allow schools to serve a smaller variety of vegetables and would likely lead to schools replacing healthful red/orange and “other” vegetables like carrots, cucumbers, green peppers, and sweet potatoes with starchy vegetables such as French fries. Starchy vegetables already account for 47.5 percent of all vegetables offered in the NSLP, with the highest amount of starchy vegetables served in middle schools (53.2 percent). Of these, French fries and similar potato products are the most common starchy vegetable served.[101] According to the 2015 DGA, children do not meet the recommended amounts of vegetables. Potatoes are the most commonly consumed vegetable, accounting for 21 percent of all vegetable consumption.[30] Providing schools with more “flexibility” in the vegetable subgroups will likely result in schools serving more French fries rather than healthier options. Yet, the USDA’s [15] found that 93.6 percent of lunch menus meet the minimum weekly requirements for red/orange vegetables and 92.1 percent meet the weekly requirements for “other” vegetables.

[1]

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[101] aged 4 to 8: average 0.8, recommended 1.5; aged 9 to 13: aveeed mi: averao e:8r5l13 te-6.6 (e)TJ 0.0eI]TJ /TT):