



*A Union of Professionals*

## **2015 Child Nutrition Reauthorization Recommendations**

AFT members have long supported greater access to healthier foods for students. Without nutritious foods, kids face elevated risk for chronic absenteeism, behavioral problems, mental illness and poorer academics. With nearly half of nation's students living in poverty and 1 in 5 living in food insecurity, school meals play an especially important role in students' health and well-being.

In 2010, Congress took bold action, using science-based recommendations to develop higher nutritional standards for meal programs under the Healthy and Hunger-Free Kids Act. AFT stood strongly with members from Syracuse to Denver, from Oklahoma City to Baltimore and many places in between in support of this legislation.

This year, Congress has an opportunity to further strengthen the law when it reauthorizes the child nutrition programs. As the reauthorization process moves forward, we encourage Congress to sustain the progress achieved through rigorous nutrition standards and support the staffing, programs and resources that best help schools serve students.

### **Maintain the nutritional standards now in place**

Beyond the incredible health benefits of the new nutrition standards, the Act also encouraged schools to move from "heat and serve" models to cooking healthy meals from scratch and provided historic support for Farm-to-School efforts. While the change has not been without challenges, today, nearly all schools in the federal meals programs are successfully using the new nutrition standards.

### **Invest in 21<sup>st</sup> century cafeterias**

School meal programs were able to quickly innovate to meet the new standards. Yet, they need supports to sustain their success. With this reauthorization, Congress has an opportunity to turn attention from the nutritional content of meals to the infrastructure that facilitates the daily delivery of healthy meals and snacks. We need to invest in 21<sup>st</sup> century school cafeterias. First, Congress can expand Farm-to-School funding to better match national demand. Reducing cost barriers to healthful foods will help to bring fresh and local ingredients to trays and connect students to experiential nutrition education. Second, Congress can outline a plan for long-term investment for new kitchen equipment. In the last few years, \$125 million dollars were made available for equipment upgrades – but schools submitted over \$630 million in requests. To prepare, serve and present great meals, schools need more resources. Finally, Congress can direct the US Department of Agriculture to link its new rules on personnel training to groundbreaking research on Smarter Lunchrooms.

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Ensuring that school food service workers have the training and hours to implement evidence-based behavioral economics strategies will help school meal programs to sell healthier foods, increase sales and improve participation.

### **Expand school breakfast**

Study upon study state the importance of breakfast for children's health, well-being and cognition. Eating breakfast improves a child's ability to learn, behave and participate in school. Unfortunately, only about half of the children who take part in the lunch program also participate in school breakfast. Schools should be encouraged to collaborate with all stakeholders, including parents, the community, administrators and all school staff to determine what strategies will maximize student participation in school breakfast. All school staff – from the bus driver to the custodian to the lunchroom staff to the teacher – should be included in the planning, training and implementation of changes to or expansions of school meal programs, as well as impact assessments.

### **End discrimination**

Participation in school meal programs frequently reflects decisions that are not always in the best interest of children. For instance, “alternate meal” and “unpaid balance” policies apply when a student has surpassed some threshold—such as five unpaid meals or a negative balance of \$12. The child is offered an alternate meal, often less substantive, less nutritious and cold, such as a cheese or peanut butter sandwich and milk. The child may be given a sticker to wear, or a letter for the backpack, as a reminder to parents to pay the account. The cashier may ask a child to return a complete meal that's already been set on the tray. Parents may be called, texted or emailed about adding to the account balance. School boards may even hire debt collection agencies to chase families for small sums.

Too often these policies are often insufficient, ineffective, discriminatory and burdensome to implement. AFT members report that these policies contribute to child hunger, stigma and academic struggles. USDA recently opened a comment period on this issue. While it is not clear how the comments will be used, Congress can direct USDA to provide technical assistance on strategies that help schools prioritize children's health.

### **Support developmentally appropriate meal scheduling**

Children now have access to better meals and fresh foods at school. But far too many do not have the time to eat their lunches. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that students get at least 20 minutes for lunch. But that means 20 minutes to actually sit down and eat — excluding time

waiting in line or walking from class to cafeteria. However, the reality is that most students have about 15 minutes to eat. This is purely due to scheduling. With increasing pressures to add instructional time and test preparation, the lunch period is often the first place that gets cut. Congress can instruct the USDA and CDC, along with other stakeholders, to provide guidance to school districts on thoughtful scheduling that would result in children having enough seat time at meal time.

### **Summer meals**

Currently, approximately 15% of children who participate in nutrition programs during the school year have access to places serving summer meals. This reauthorization should make it easier for children to access summer meal sites by:

- Reducing the duplicative administrative work sites must complete;
- Permitting communities with 40% of children who qualify for free or reduced meals to offer summer meals; and
- In addition, sites serving summer meals should be allowed to provide a third meal for children who have been in care for an entire work day.

Finally, families with children who qualify for free and reduced price school meals should be able to receive a summer EBT card to purchase food at retail stores while school is not in session.