

## **CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS**

### ***COSSBA Requests***

- Provide increased reimbursements for school lunch and breakfast; provide funds to cover higher food/labor costs; and expand lunch and breakfast programs to offer free meals to all students.
- Reauthorization that reduces burdensome federal mandates and provides flexibility for school districts to administer healthy meals students want to eat, to include reducing meal planning complexities, cutting red tape, and maximizing staff time and funds for meal prep.
- Congress must bolster NSLP/SBP to include expansion of community eligibility so that more schools serving large numbers of low-income children can provide meals at no charge to all students, including creating a statewide option so that states could more easily begin offering meals at no charge to all students. Under community eligibility, school districts must cover any costs that exceed the federal reimbursement. Because the reimbursement sometimes falls short of covering a school's full meal costs, many eligible schools have chosen not to participate.
- No unfunded mandates or under-resourced requirements.

### **Farm Bill Priorities**

- Support robust funding and flexibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), to ensure families have the support they need to combat hunger.
- Strengthen funding and support for programs that directly help children including the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and the Food and Agriculture Service Learning Program.

### ***Issue History***

Millions of public-school students are served by national child nutrition programs every year. Free and reduced-priced meals offered through federal programs support kids' healthy development and ensure that students from low-income households have access to nutritious breakfasts and lunches at school. When students come to school hungry, they can't learn.

As nearly one in five children in our nation live in households without enough to eat, these programs are a literal lifeline for students and may often provide the only full and healthy meals they get all day. Unfortunately, amid post pandemic uncertainties, persistent challenges and cost increases continue to threaten the stability of school meal programs. According to a recent survey by the School Nutrition Association:

- 99% of school meal programs are struggling with increasing costs (84% said this was a significant challenge);
- Just 17% of programs said the current federal reimbursement rate is sufficient to cover the cost of producing a lunch and almost all are concerned about the long-term financial sustainability of their programs;
- 91% of programs are challenged by staff shortages – exacerbated by inadequate reimbursement rates;

- Nearly 90% are still struggling with shortages of menu items; and
- 93% report continued challenges from unpaid meal debt, with the average debt continuing to climb annually.

In response to the ongoing pandemic, the USDA extended a set of nationwide waivers intended to help school meal programs feed students through June 30, 2022. Congress subsequently passed the Keep Kids Fed Act, which extended some waiver authority and also increased reimbursement rates for the 2022-23 school year. Unfortunately, those increased reimbursement rates and waiver authority expired in July 2023. As these survey results show, schools across the country continue to struggle with providing adequate meals to students in need.