

POSITION STATEMENT:

The Society of Behavioral Medicine Supports Retaining Funding for School Meals to Reduce Hunger and Food Insecurity in American Children

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SUMMARY STATEMENT

The Society of Behavioral Medicine (SBM) urges Congress to restore USDA funding for school meals through reinstating the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program and the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program to prevent hunger and reduce food insecurity in American children. SBM also encourages legislators to sponsor HR 24.02, the No Hungry Kids in Schools Act, which would expand access to free school meals and make it easier for schools to participate in the program.



BACKGROUND

In 2015 and again in 2018, the Society of Behavioral Medicine disseminated health policy position statements to support the school meal nutrition standards put forth in the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act in 2010^{1,2}. These standards showed improved dietary quality in kids without increasing additional school meal waste³⁻⁶. Despite data supporting the importance of access to nutritious school meals⁷, the school meal program continues to be a contentious topic among members of Congress. This is especially important as a body of research has long found disparities in nutrition levels among children from lower socioeconomic statuses or with minoritized racial and ethnic identities⁸⁻¹¹. Given that more than 30 million children across the U.S. rely on the National School Breakfast and Lunch Programs for a significant portion of their daily nutrition¹², federal meal programs and nutrition standards are critical for increasing access to nutrient dense foods, and for reducing the stigma that can be linked to school meals¹³⁻¹⁴. Further, research has shown that participation in these programs improves achievement and attendance outcomes¹⁵⁻¹⁸, highlighting that the impact of these programs extends beyond nutrition. New issues recently resurfaced that threaten student access to nutritious foods, particularly for students who need them most¹⁹.

CURRENT POLICY ISSUES

In March 2025, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) terminated two key programs: the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program and the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program²⁰. These programs provided over \$1 billion in funding to help schools and food banks buy fresh, locally sourced food. The USDA cited a shift toward "long-term, fiscally responsible initiatives" as the reason for ending these programs²⁰. This decision directly contradicts the priorities of the Make America Healthy Again commission (Section 5, iv), which focuses on the importance of child nutrition.²¹

Currently, many schools face significant barriers in providing universal free meals²². Schools must have at least 25% low-income students to qualify for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)²³, which leaves many schools just below that threshold unable to offer free meals to all. Additionally, CEP doesn't fully reimburse schools for meal costs, meaning they often have to rely on other funds to cover the gap²⁴. The eligibility process is also complex, with calculations done on a school-by-school basis, leading to administrative burdens. Furthermore, without universal free meals, many students face stigma¹⁴ or accumulate meal debt²⁵, which prevents them from fully participating in school meal programs.

One reason that school meals are so vulnerable to changes from administration to administration is because the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010 gave the USDA the authority to set nutrition standards for school

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meals²⁶. That means while the law mandates that there be standards, the actual details of those standards — like limits on sodium, added sugars, or whole grain requirements — are not set by Congress. Instead, they're created and modified by the USDA through rulemaking, a process that's more flexible but also more vulnerable to political changes.

POTENTIAL POLICY SOLUTIONS

1. SBM recommends reinstating both the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program and the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program is important to better support local farmers and communities and provide higher quality food to American children. These programs previously allocated over \$1 billion to support schools in purchasing fresh, locally sourced food.
2. SBM recommends co-sponsoring the "No Hungry Kids in Schools Act". This act was introduced by the House in March of 2025, would allow states to make all public school students eligible for free meals, starting in the 2025–2026 school year. This bill removes that requirement for states that agree to cover some of the costs using non-federal funds. It also simplifies how eligibility is calculated by looking at student data across the whole state, rather than school by school. Overall, it expands access to free school meals and makes it easier for schools to participate in the program.
3. SBM recommends that the HHFKA include specific standards explicitly that are not vulnerable to rule changes through the USDA. Some examples of recommended standards would be including explicit nutrition standards that are driven by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, having requirements that fresh and local food access remain funded and increasing access to universal free meals in high-need schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Reinstating both the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program and the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program which will:
 - a) direct funds to help schools and food banks buy fresh, local foods
 - b) restore programs to improve meal quality and reduce food insecurity
 - c) support local farms to boost equity and strengthen food systems
2. Co-sponsor HR 24.02, the No Hungry Kids in Schools Act, which would expand access to free school meals and make it easier for schools to participate in the program by:
 - a) allowing states to make all public school students eligible for free meals
 - b) simplifying/streamlining eligibility calculations with statewide data, reducing administrative burden
 - c) eliminating stigma and meal debt by offering universal free meals

3. Protect and Expand the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act by
 - a) codifying nutrition standards into law (not just USDA rulemaking)
 - b) requiring that programs supporting fresh and local food access remain funded
 - c) lowering barriers for high-need schools to adopt universal free meals

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ENDORSEMENTS

