

March 24, 2021

Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
Senate Agriculture Committee
731 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC, 20510

Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
Senate Agriculture Committee
141 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC, 20510

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, and Committee Members:

We, the undersigned organizations, support reauthorization of child nutrition programs that strengthens science-based nutrition standards for school meals and provides healthy school meals for all children. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the twin epidemics of poor nutrition and food insecurity, and the economic downturn has likely increased the number of children who qualify for school meals. Congress must ensure that children's nutritional needs are met so that all children have the nutrition they need to grow up healthy. Specifically, we ask the following priorities to be included in child nutrition reauthorization:

Strengthen science-based nutrition standards. Given that the pandemic has increased the number of children with obesity, school meal nutrition standards need to be strong and evidence-based now more than ever. Science-based nutrition standards have been shown to decrease childhood overweight and obesity, decrease disparities in access to healthy food, improve nutrition, and can lower health costs. Schools are currently required to meet the nutrition standards rule from 2012 (77 FR 4088, January 26, 2012); however the rule is now outdated with the latest nutrition science. Schools can currently obtain waivers if they are experiencing hardships due to the pandemic, but many children have begun to return to in-person learning. The next reauthorization must not only protect the current standards, but empower the U.S. Department of Agriculture to update the standards to align with the recently-released Dietary Guidelines for Americans and provide resources to help schools successfully transition back to following the evidenced-based meal pattern.

Provide healthy school meals for all. Many struggling families do not qualify for free school meals, and school meal fees create a barrier to participation. Offering school meals to all enrolled students eliminates the cost barrier for children whose families' income is near the cutoff line to receive free school meals or for families whose income fluctuates throughout the year. Healthy school meals for all reduces the paperwork burden for families and schools; eliminates the stigma of being singled out for receiving school meal assistance; and helps programs return to fiscal solvency. The nationwide waivers are currently set to expire September 30, 2021. Congress must ensure that schools continue to provide healthy school meals for all children.

Sincerely,

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
Advocates for Better Children's Diets
American Academy of Pediatrics
American Heart Association
American Public Health Association
Association of SNAP Nutrition Education Administrators (ASNNA)
Association of State Public Health Nutritionists
Balanced
Center for Science in the Public Interest
ChangeLab Solutions

Chef Ann Foundation
Colorado Children's Campaign
Common Threads
Community Food Advocates
First Focus Campaign for Children
Food Research & Action Center
FoodCorps
Healthy Schools Campaign
Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy
LunchAssist
MomsRising
National Action Against Obesity
National Education Association
National Farm to School Network
National PTA
National Wellness Policy Study at the University of Illinois Chicago
Nemours Children's Health System
Nourish California
Nutrition Policy Institute, University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources
Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine
Real Food For Kids
Save the Children Action Network (SCAN)
Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior
Union of Concerned Scientists
United Fresh Produce Association
Urban School Food Alliance