

Ill-Equipped:

Why the U.S. Needs to Invest in School Kitchen Equipment and Infrastructure

Thanks to the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010, school meals look a lot different than they used to—containing more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, age-appropriate calorie levels, and less sodium and unhealthy fat. These improvements have been a resounding success: The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) conducted the 2019 School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study (SNMCS), the first nationally representative study to assess school meals after HHFKA and most comprehensive assessment of school meals to date. The SNMCS found that the nutritional quality of school breakfasts and lunches under HHFKA, as measured by the Healthy Eating Index (HEI) score, increased on average by at least 21 percent and 23 percent, respectively, for all school types, between school years 2009-10 and 2014-15.¹

Healthy school meals are more important than ever. According to a 2021 Census Bureau poll, 7-13 percent of adults with children reported that their kids sometimes or often didn't eat enough in the last week because they couldn't afford it.² While overall rates of food insecurity in the US remained steady during the pandemic, the rates of food insecurity for households with children increased significantly. And, among children experiencing food insecurity, there was an increase in the severity of food insecurity where more children were reported going hungry, skipping meals, or not eating for a whole day because there was not enough money for food.³

School foodservice programs have been struggling to feed not just students, but entire communities during the pandemic. Underfunded for years and reeling from millions of dollars in losses from the pandemic, they are facing myriad uncertainties—from supply chain issues to labor shortages.⁴ One way to help them feed kids: **provide funding for updating kitchen equipment and infrastructure.**

History of Kitchen Equipment Funding

For decades, Congress has not provided consistent nor adequate funding for school foodservice operations and school kitchens have languished. Recognizing the need for bolstering school kitchens in the school meal programs, Congress first provided funding in 1946 as part of the National School Lunch Act⁵ for lunch and Child Nutrition Act of 1966⁶ for breakfast. Subsequent legislation in the late 1970s provided reimbursement for equipment purchases,⁷ however funding quickly ceased in response to the recession in the 1980s.^{8,9,10} Most recently, the American Recovery and

Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 provided \$100 million in funding,¹¹ along with annual appropriations that started in 2010,¹² though the need was much greater. In total, \$330 million has been granted for kitchen equipment,¹³ yet there are still gaps that exist for producing meals within the time and budget constraints, while meeting school nutrition guidelines. The Biden administration has proposed investments in school kitchens to reduce the environmental impact and congressional proposals such as in the Build Back Better Act would provide as much as \$500 million and the School Food Modernization Act (S. 876; H.R. 4379) would provide annual funding.

A Dire Need for Investment

Even before the pandemic, a nationally representative survey of school food service administrators found that 88 percent of districts needed at least one piece of kitchen equipment that would support them in meeting the current nutrition standards.¹⁴ Prior to the pandemic, administrators reported that only 42 percent of schools had a budget set for purchasing kitchen equipment; less than half believed that this budget was sufficient to meet their equipment needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated budget shortfalls in school nutrition programs: programs reported a loss of \$2.1 billion in total reimbursements from March to November 2020 compared to the year prior.¹⁵

The needs for school kitchen modernization are not exclusive to equipment; infrastructure upgrades are needed as well. Specifically, 46 percent of school food service administrators needed more physical space for food storage, preparation, and serving.¹⁶ Other infrastructure issues highlighted included a need for updated the electrical wiring of the school to be able to install and support newer equipment.

In addition to helping schools meet nutrition standards in school meals, investments in kitchen equipment and infrastructure could support other child nutrition programs, such as the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, the Summer Food Service Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program, which all rely on school kitchens to feed children beyond the school day.¹⁷ These investments could help alleviate the pressure felt by schools as a result of the labor shortage, by reducing labor hours spent on time-intensive workarounds.

Current appropriations for kitchen improvements (\$30 million as of FY2021) are insufficient in meeting the needs of school food service programs nationwide. The study of school food service administrators estimated the median cost for new kitchen equipment needed in school kitchens across the country is \$37,000 per school, but varied widely based on region, poverty category, and size, with some schools needing

approximately \$88,000. ¹⁸ Although the outcomes of ARRA have granted schools \$330 million to modernize their kitchens since 2009, ¹⁹ this amount falls short in funding the remaining schools in need. For example, in School year 2009-2010, USDA received over \$630 million in kitchen equipment grant requests from school food service administrators, yet the ARRA funding provided only \$125 million. ²⁰

Examples of Kitchen Equipment Needs

There are three major types of kitchen equipment: cooking, service, and refrigeration/food storage.

- **Cooking equipment** (e.g., combination ovens, steamers, and tilting skillets)
- **Service equipment** (e.g., expanded serving lines, point-of-sale systems, and mobile carts)
- **Refrigeration/food storage equipment** (e.g., [walk-in] refrigerators, freezers, blast chillers, and storage containers)

Policy Recommendations

Federal, state, and local lawmakers must invest in school kitchen equipment and infrastructure. Recommendations for key stakeholders are outlined below.

Congress

Pass the School Food Modernization Act (S. 876; H.R. 4379). This bipartisan bill helps to support schools and districts with their infrastructure and equipment needs through loan guarantees, technical assistance, and staff training. ²¹ Congress should also continue to appropriate funding for school kitchen equipment grants and support the Build Back Better Act which would provide \$500 million for school kitchens.

State and local lawmakers

Provide additional funding for kitchen equipment and infrastructure investments. Funding should allow school administrators to construct, remodel, or expand kitchens, dining facilities, and food storage infrastructure and provide seed money for less extensive infrastructure upgrades or purchases of high-quality, durable kitchen equipment. ²² Funding should also be made available to strengthen training and provide technical assistance to school food service personnel, many of whom need

additional skills and expertise to prepare appealing meals that meet the school meal nutrition standards.

For more information, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture. *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study: Volume 2 – Nutritional Characteristics of School Meals*. 2019. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNMCS-Volume2.pdf>. Accessed April 12, 2022.

² Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. *Tracking the COVID-19 Economy's Effects on Food, Housing and Employment Hardships*. September, 2021. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-economys-effects-on-food-housing-and>. Accessed September 13, 2021.

³ Coleman-Jensen, A et al. *Household Food Security in the United States in 2020*, ERR-298, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. 2021.

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/102076/err-298.pdf?v=5485.5>

⁴ Ngo, M. No Veggies, No Buns, Few Forks: Schools Scramble to Feed Students Amid Shortages. *The New York Times*. September 27, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/27/us/politics/schools-labor-supply-shortages.html>. Accessed October 17, 2021.

⁵ National School Lunch Act. P.L. 79-396.

⁶ Child Nutrition Act. P.L. 89-642.

⁷ National School Lunch Act. P.L. 396-231. 91 STAT. 1332

⁸ Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. *1980-82 Early 1980s Recession*. n.d. <https://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/projects/debt/1980srecession.html>. Accessed August 5, 2021.

⁹ Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. *1981 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act*. n.d. <https://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/projects/debt/1981reconciliationact.html>. Accessed August 5, 2021.

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¹⁰ 13 U.S.R. §§810 et seq. School Lunch Programs.

¹¹ American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. P.L. 111-5. 123 STAT. 199

¹² U.S. Department of Agriculture. *NSLP EQUIPMENT ASSISTANCE GRANT STATE ALLOCATIONS*. June 23, 2021. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/NSLP-equipment-grant-allocations.pdf>. Accessed August 4, 2021.

¹³ U.S. Department of Agriculture. *NSLP Equipment Assistance Grant State Allocations*. June 23, 2021. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/NSLP-equipment-grant-allocations.pdf> Accessed August 4, 2021.

¹⁴ The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. *Serving Healthy School Meals*. 2013. https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2013/12/kits_equipment_report.pdf. Accessed August 1, 2021.

¹⁵ School Nutrition Association. *School Nutrition Meals Served And Reimbursements During The COVID-19 Pandemic*. 2021. https://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/News_and_Publications/Press_Releases/Press_Releases/School-Nutrition-Meals-Served-and-Reimbursements-During-the-COVID-19-Pandemic.pdf. Accessed August 30, 2021.

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- ¹⁶ The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2013.
- ¹⁷ The Pew Charitable Trusts. *USDA's School Kitchen Grants Benefit Meal Programs and Students*. June 7, 2016. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2016/06/usdas-school-kitchen-grants-benefit-meal-programs-and-students>. Accessed August 2, 2021.
- ¹⁸ The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2013.
- ¹⁹ United Fresh Produce Association. *Let's Move Salad Bars to Schools*. n.d. <https://www.unitedfresh.org/nutrition/lets-move-salad-bars-to-schools/>. Accessed August 2, 2021.
- ²⁰ The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2013.
- ²¹ U.S. Congress. Senate. *School Food Modernization Act of 2021*, S 876, 117th Cong., 1st sess., introduced in Senate March 18, 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/s876/BILLS-117s876is.pdf>.
- ²² The Pew Charitable Trusts. "The School Food Modernization Act." February 2015, <https://cspinet.org/sites/default/files/attachment/pew-school-food-equipment.pdf>. Accessed August 2, 2021.