

Chairman Fetterman, Ranking Member Braun and Members of the Subcommittee.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the School Nutrition Programs. I am Crystal FitzSimons, Interim President for the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC). We are the leading organization working to end poverty-related hunger in the U.S. by advancing bold and equitable policy solutions. I am proud to have worked at FRAC for over 25 years, most of that time focused on the child nutrition programs.

According to recently released data from USDA, 47.4 million people in America live in food insecure households, including 13.8 million children. That is unacceptable.

FRAC has worked for over 50 years to strengthen and expand the School Breakfast and National School Lunch Programs, because we know they play a critical role in reducing childhood hunger, supporting education, and connecting students to quality food from our agricultural community.

An extensive body of [research](#) highlights the positive impact school meals have on student achievement, attendance, behavior, physical and mental health, and food security. A [recent study](#) also found that the school nutrition programs offer some of the healthiest meals that children eat, and the updated nutrition standards will further improve the nutritional quality. USDA has taken a thoughtful approach to gradually implement the new standards.

Over the last 10 years, a growing number of high-need schools have been able to offer meals at no charge to all students through the Community Eligibility Provision. CEP was implemented nationwide during the 2014-2015 school year. Participation has grown year after year as schools saw the benefits: more students eating school meals, less administrative work, no more unpaid school meal fees, reduced stigma, and improvements to the school environment.

Then the pandemic hit. A key component of our country's response was allowing all schools to offer meals at no charge to all students. This served as a pilot for a nationwide Healthy School Meals for All policy. It was a tremendous success.

Several states did not want to go back to pre-pandemic school meal operations. To date, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont have all passed Healthy School Meals for All policies.

While those eight states are showing us what is possible, there are critical steps the Subcommittee and Congress should take to enhance the reach and impact of school meals nationwide.

First, Congress can ensure that all children nationwide are hunger free and ready to learn while they are at school by allowing all schools to offer meals to all their students at no charge. The Universal School Meals Program Act creates that path.

Second, it's important to address barriers that keep students from participating, particularly in School Breakfast, which serves only half of the children who participate in school lunch. Offering breakfast at no charge to all students—as Pennsylvania does—and implementing an innovative service model such as breakfast in the classroom has been shown to dramatically increase participation. Congress can provide grants or additional reimbursements to support innovative school breakfast models.

A less direct path forward is to bolster CEP, so more schools can offer free meals to all their students. CEP eliminates school meal applications. Instead, the percentage of “identified students” is multiplied by 1.6 to determine the federal reimbursements that schools receive. These “identified students” are categorically eligible for free school meals because they participate in certain means-tested federal programs, such as SNAP, or they are homeless, runaway, migrant, in foster care, or in Head Start, and automatically certified for free school meals outside of the school meal application process. Increasing the multiplier to 2.5 would allow more schools to operate CEP without fear of losing money. Another important step is to allow a statewide CEP option. Senators Casey and Fetterman’s School Hunger Elimination Act would do both.

Maintaining the eligibility threshold at 25% of identified students through statute is another important step, and Senator Fetterman’s Nutrition Red Tape Reduction Act does just that.

Finally, as long as children are being certified for free or reduced-price school meals, Congress should do more to ensure that children who are categorically eligible for free school meals are certified to receive them. For example, states and school districts are only required to conduct direct certification for children in SNAP households but should be required to automatically certify children whose households participate in TANF, as well as children who are homeless, runaway, migrant, in foster care, or Head Start. In addition, more federal means-tested programs, such as Medicaid and SSI, should be used for direct certification.

This would help ensure that our most vulnerable children do not fall through the cracks, reduce the burden of school meal applications, and improve program integrity.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I welcome your questions.