

June 23, 2023

The Honorable Abigail Spanberger  
562 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Spanberger:

I am writing on behalf of First Focus Campaign for Children, a bipartisan children's advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal budget and policy decisions, to express our support for the Helping Schools Feed Kids Act of 2023 (H.R. 1424).

Both inside and outside the classroom and throughout both early childhood and K-12 education, adequate nutrition is essential for a child's well-being and development. However, an estimated 1.54 million of America's students cannot afford the meals provided at school.<sup>1</sup> While many of these students rely on the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) free or reduced-price meal options, others who do not qualify or fail to complete the application may go hungry - to the detriment of their academic success and health. Healthy, free school meals for all would give all children a chance to flourish.

America's students deserve access to nutritious, healthy, and filling meals, no matter their family's income. Food insecurity—which leads to poor nutrition—directly influences health and well-being throughout a child's life. For some food-insecure students, school lunches may be the only meal they receive that day. Food insecurity is specifically associated with poorer physical and mental health, lower school performance, and diminished psychosocial functioning.<sup>2</sup> Families primarily suffer from food insecurity because they lack the resources to access and purchase healthy, adequate food. Food insecure families must often face impossible decisions between keeping food on the table, purchasing medication, or paying utility bills. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) allows families living in communities with high rates of poverty to feed their children a healthy, satiating meal every school day, and the Child and Adult Care Food (CACFP) program provides meals and snacks to children receiving care from participating child care providers.

The lifelong health implications of a consistently nutritious diet during childhood cannot be overstated. Science shows that children's nutrition is directly linked with healthy development and a healthy diet reduces a child's risk of obesity, diabetes, and developing chronic conditions like heart

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<sup>1</sup> Hanson, Melanie. "School Lunch Debt Statistics." Education Data Initiative. October 21, 2021. <https://educationdata.org/school-lunch-debt>.

<sup>2</sup> Cook, John and Jeng, Karen. "Child Food Insecurity: The Economic Impact on Our Nation." Feeding America. Last accessed June 13, 2023. <https://www.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/child-economy-study.pdf>.

disease, tooth decay, high blood pressure, and cancer later in life.<sup>3</sup> During these critical childhood years children develop lifelong food preferences. Meals provided by schools, which are often healthier than meals that low-income children may receive at home, help children create healthy eating habits that will carry through to adulthood. In light of the USDA's recent updates to school meal patterns, school-provided meals will contain less sodium and sugar and more whole grains. These changes mean that student's meals will have benefits to their brain health, improve their capacity for learning, decrease the risk of early-onset heart disease, and keep kids feeling fuller for longer.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, research shows that roughly 4% of families with students participating in the CEP became food secure as a result of the program.<sup>5</sup> With more funds available for food at home, students may have access to nutritious schools both inside and outside of school.

Beyond physical health, research shows that access to consistent, healthy meals benefits children academically. Meals high in sugar, unlike school meals consistent with USDA's new guidelines, affect a child's brain health, affecting academic performance, learning and memory. Universal school meals may also help increase attendance by decreasing illness among the now healthier students.<sup>6</sup> A healthy, balanced diet improves academic performance and increases children's brain capacity.<sup>7</sup> School meal programs are critical supports, filling the gaps and fighting hunger and poor nutrition when low-income families struggle to put food on the table. Studies show that students from low-income households who rely on free school meals for breakfast and lunch have a significantly healthier diet than those who do not.<sup>8</sup>

Students who are eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches but instead bring meals and snacks from home consume significantly more saturated fat and sugar and significantly less fruit than their National School Lunch Program-participating counterparts.<sup>9</sup> Schools that offer universal meals via the CEP found that participation rates rose by an average of 6.8% for lunch and 12.1% for breakfast, allowing students who experienced difficulties with the application process or narrowly missed the subsidized meal eligibility window to access nutritious food.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, some studies suggest that, due to their higher nutritional content and satiety, healthier school meals may lead to decreased consumption of junk food outside of school.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Childhood Nutrition Facts." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. August 5, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/nutrition/facts.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> "Sodium and Kids." American Heart Association. December 2, 2022. <https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart/sodium/sodium-and-kids>.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen, "Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review."

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, Juliana F. W. et al. "Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review." *Nutrients*, Vol 13(3). March 11, 2021. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33799780/>.

<sup>7</sup> Rausch, Rita. "Nutrition and Academic Performance in School Age Children: The Relation to Obesity and Food Insufficiency." *Journal of Nutrition and Food Sciences*. Vol 3(2). 2013. <https://www.cabdirect.org/globalhealth/abstract/20133398105>.

<sup>8</sup> Gearan, Elizabeth C., Monzella, Kelley, Jennings, Leah, and Fox, Mary Kay. "Differences in Diet Quality between School Lunch Participants and Nonparticipants in the United States by Income and Race." *Nutrients*, Vol 12(12). December 2020. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7765856/>.

<sup>9</sup> Vernarelli, Jacqueline A., O'Brien, Brady. "A Vote for School Lunches: School Lunches Provide Superior Nutrient Quality than Lunches Obtained from Other Sources in a Nationally Representative Sample of US Children." *Nutrients*, Vol. 9(9). August 24, 2017. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28837090/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen, "Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review."

The successes of universal school meals are well-documented by the triumphs of the 40,235 schools participating in the CEP.<sup>12</sup> It eliminates all stigma for students who receive subsidized lunches or have accrued lunch debt. These children are then freed from the emotional toll of the psychological burden and bullying incurred by receiving free lunches. For low-income students, this impact is both profound and measurable. Research shows that in their third year of CEP participation schools could see a 15% decline in suspensions, particularly among students who previously received subsidized lunches, who are suspended almost twice as much as their peers.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond healthier and happier students, school administrators themselves benefit from universal school meal programs. Participating schools see decreased administrative burdens and costs associated with their meal programs. Rather than spending their time processing applications and paperwork, nutrition staff can better focus on their menus, purchasing, and interacting with students.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the elimination of student meal debt means that schools no longer grapple with collection and monitoring of a financial liability. Faculty can spend their days helping students stay healthy rather than navigating bureaucracy and chasing down debts.

The Helping Schools Feed Kids Act of 2023 will play an integral role in helping more schools access the critical support offered by the CEP and the CACFP. Combined, these two programs ensure that children, especially those in low-income households, are nourished throughout some of their most essential developmental years. During the pandemic, Congress authorized higher meal and snack reimbursement rates for schools and child care providers. However, these elevated reimbursement rates are set to expire in July of 2023, returning the rates to their original levels. The increased reimbursements allow schools and child care providers to keep up with rising costs due to labor and food shortages, the rising cost of food, and inflation. This legislation will help more children learn, grow, and thrive, both in and out of the classroom.

Thank you for putting America's students first and making sure that children have access to consistent and nutritious meals. This legislation will have long-term positive impacts throughout children's lives and into adulthood. We look forward to working with you to pass the Helping Schools Feed Kids Act of 2023.

Sincerely,



Bruce Lesley  
President

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<sup>12</sup> "Community Eligibility: The Key to Hunger-Free Schools." Food and Research Action Center. May 2023. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/cep-report-2023.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Radsky, Vitaly et al. "Stigma Free Lunch: School Meals and Student Discipline." United States Census Bureau. June 2022. <https://www2.census.gov/ces/wp/2022/CES-WP-22-23.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> "Community Eligibility: The Key to Hunger-Free Schools."