

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
Senate Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable Susan Collins
Vice Chair
Senate Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable Tom Cole
Chair
House Committee on Appropriations
United States House

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member
House Committee on Appropriations
United States House

Dear Chairs and Ranking Members,

As work on the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies spending bill continues, the undersigned organizations respectfully urge you to oppose any policy riders or report language blocking implementation of stronger nutrition standards for the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

School nutrition standards remain one of the most important public health achievements in a generation. A 2021 study found that school meals are the healthiest source of food for children—more nutritious than grocery stores, restaurants, and other sources.¹ For children experiencing food insecurity participating in the program, school breakfast and lunch may also be the only meals they receive that day. As such, we strongly support the Congressionally mandated U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) rule to strengthen the school nutrition standards consistent with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and strongly oppose legacy or new policy riders – or report language – that block or weaken implementation of evidence-based nutrition standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. In addition, we oppose special interests' efforts that undermine evidence-based nutrition in schools, including providing exceptions for certain products from having to meet nutrition standards, such as cheese and whole milk.

The USDA's final ruling advances the nutritional quality of school meals while still disseminating pragmatic nutrition standards and an achievable implementation timeline. Already, schools are meeting, and in some cases, exceeding the recently released nutrition standards, all

¹ Liu J, et al. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003- 2018. JAMA Netw Open. 2021;4(4):e215262.

while serving healthy, delicious, and culturally relevant foods to their students.² Additionally, the largest food companies have many K-12 products that meet the added sugars, sodium, and whole grain-rich standards, thus further facilitating rule implementation.^{3,4} We must preserve and build on the progress schools and the food industry have made over the past decade to meet science-based nutrition standards.

Over the past decade, opponents claim that strengthened nutrition standards are not feasible due to labor shortages, supply chain disruptions, and other issues facing school food service programs. These are indeed real challenges that require solutions beyond weakening nutrition standards and reversing progress on healthier school meals. These solutions should focus on helping schools serve healthier meals while weathering these challenges. For example:

- In September 2022, the USDA launched its \$100 million Healthy Meals Incentive Initiative with the goal of improving the nutritional quality of school meals.⁵ This year, the USDA also announced \$26 million in new grants to continue investing in schools' efforts to serve nutritious and delicious meals, especially through food producer partnerships.⁶
- From 2021-2023, Congress increased technical assistance funding for school food service programs. It was disappointing that the FY24 omnibus cut funding to \$18,004,000 for Team Nutrition, far below the level programs need for success. Investments in technical assistance (TA) and school kitchen equipment grants are transformational. We urge Congress to increase TA funding to \$23,162,000 and provide at least \$30,000,000 for school equipment grants to further ensure the future success of school meals programs and combat inflation.

Finally, it is important to note strategies many successful programs employ to increase school meal consumption that do not involve weakening nutrition standards. These include providing students with sufficient time to eat lunch (at least 20 minutes of seat time); recess before lunch; serving lunch at an appropriate time of day; serving easier to eat versions of food (such as pre-cut fruit); and limiting availability of competitive foods (snacks and beverages sold in vending machines and a la carte). Salad bars in schools and spice bars have also proven to be effective and give children the autonomy to personalize their meals. While some of these strategies cannot be addressed at the federal level, we encourage you to consider ways you can support these efforts.

The undersigned organizations also applaud USDA's final rule updating the WIC food package as it includes critically needed changes: codifying the recent expansions of WIC's fruit and vegetable benefit, expanding cultural food options, providing seafood to a broader range of participants, increasing issuance of whole grains, reducing fruit juice, and more. We support the

² Center for Science in the Public Interest. Healthy, student-driven meals in Montgomery County. October 2022. <https://www.cspinet.org/resource/healthy-student-driven-meals-montgomery-county>. Accessed May 21, 2024.

³ Center for Science in the Public Interest. 2021 School Meals Corporate Report Card. November 2021. <https://www.cspinet.org/resource/school-meals-corporate-report-card-2021>. Accessed May 20, 2024.

⁴ Center for Science in the Public Interest. Behind the Carton: 2022 School Milk Report. December 2022. <https://www.cspinet.org/resource/behind-carton-school-milk-report-2022>. Accessed May 20, 2024.

⁵ United States Department of Agriculture. USDA Launches \$100 Million Healthy School Meals Initiative, Announces Grant Program for Rural Schools. September 2022. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/news-item/fns-0010.22>. Accessed July 1, 2024.

⁶ United States Department of Agriculture. FNS Announces \$26 Million of Investments in School Meal Programs. May 2024. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/news-item/fns-003.24>. Accessed July 1, 2024.

science-based process that drives WIC's proven health outcomes, and strongly oppose policy riders blocking or weakening implementation of the WIC food package update.

WIC must be fully funded to sustain these health-focused benefits for an increasing number of program participants. This federal nutrition program is a primary defense against food and nutrition insecurity while also stimulating local economies. WIC has a proven track record of reducing hunger, improving diet quality, and preventing disease. Inadequately funding WIC threatens to harm the food and nutrition security of families and could reverse hard-won gains in the enrollment of eligible participants. For nearly 30 years, there has been a bipartisan agreement in Congress to provide WIC with resources needed to ensure that every eligible pregnant, post-partum, and breastfeeding parent, infant, or child who seeks WIC services can receive them; we urge Congress to carry forward this agreement and provide WIC with the necessary resources.

Finally, we urge you to pass an FY 2025 appropriations bill clean of riders and report language that would hinder or harm essential nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs and WIC. Thank you for your consideration and attention to these important matters.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Better Children's Diets
American Academy of Pediatrics
American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network
American Heart Association
Balanced
Center for Biological Diversity
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Chef Ann Foundation
Coalition for Healthy School Food
Community Food Advocates
Food Research & Action Center (FRAC)
The Food Trust
Healthy Food America
Healthy Schools Campaign
MomsRising
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National League for Nursing
North Carolina Alliance for Health
Partnership for a Healthier America
Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine
Society of Behavioral Medicine
UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health
Wholesome Wave