

POSITION STATEMENT:

Increase Reimbursable Rates for School Meals to Support Nutrition Equity Across All Children

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SUMMARY STATEMENT

The Society of Behavioral Medicine supports increasing funding to schools by raising reimbursable school meal rates, to reduce barriers to complying with updated school nutrition guidelines that will reduce health and academic disparities.



THE PROBLEM

Recent legislation has been enacted to improve the nutritional quality of school meals, but increasing food prices and operational costs can hamper compliance and improvements in school nutrition. More financial support in the form of increased reimbursable school meal rates is needed to ensure compliance and equitable improvements. Nutrient-dense school meals improve overall dietary quality, reduce hunger, promote healthy weight, enhance school readiness, and reduce academic and health disparities among at-risk children.¹⁻² The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) sought to improve nutrition guidelines for school meals by increasing whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, and decreasing saturated fat and sodium. Recent legislation has further improved the nutritional quality of school meals by increasing limitations for sodium and adding new limitations for sugar.

If schools comply with these new guidelines, especially schools serving at-risk children, there will be widespread positive impacts on both health and academic outcomes, and related disparities.³ However, in the wake of post-COVID-19 inflation and rising food and operating costs, schools will need more support and resources to comply. Schools have long struggled with compliance and have not fully adhered to guidelines for at least one or more nutrients.⁴⁻⁵ Barriers to compliance are mostly tied to constrained finances that result in (1) difficulty with acquiring affordable and nutritional foods, and (2) inadequate infrastructure such as inability to pay for a sufficiently large staff, sparse time and resources for training, and inadequate kitchen appliances.⁶⁻¹³ In recent years, these barriers have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and related economic disruptions and abnormally high fiscal inflation.⁹ As such, in 2023, most

school districts reported operating their meal program at a large financial deficit.⁶ Depending on the size of the district, between 50-75% of school districts anticipated operating at a loss, and between 70-90% of districts said they were severely concerned about the reimbursable meal rates.⁶

CURRENT POLICY

- Child nutrition departments receive a per-meal reimbursement for each qualifying meal served
- The amount of that reimbursement depends on the eligibility of the student as either free, reduced-price, or paid.
- These were 2023/2024 MAXIMUM reimbursement rates (Maximum reimbursement rates are given to schools where 60% or more of students receive free or reduced-price meals): \$4.50 per free lunch, \$4.10 per reduced-price lunch, and \$0.56 per full-price lunch; \$2.73 per free breakfast.
- Reimbursable rates usually increase a small amount each year (typically a few cents), and in both FY 22/23 and FY 23/24, maximum rates increased around 40 cents due to increases in food costs (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/rates-reimbursement>)
- However, these increases in reimbursable rates have not kept up with inflation for food and operational costs, and school meal programs are operating at a larger fiscal deficit than ever
- Schools need support to cover additional costs of complying with quality increases in nutrition guidelines, such as buying more nutritious foods and better training for staff

*Endorsing organizations do not write or have any control over position statement content.
All authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.*

RELEVANT PROPOSED LEGISLATION:

- Rep. Jim McGovern (D-MA) has introduced the Healthy Meals Help Kids Learn Act, which permanently raises the reimbursement rate by 45 cents for free and reduced-price lunch and 28 cents for breakfast with annual adjustments for inflation.
- In the House, this bill was assigned to the House Committee on Education and the Workforce in March of 2023, but no further progress has been made (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/1269/titles?s=1&r=97&q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22h.r.+6%22%7D>)
- In the Senate, this bill was assigned to the committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry in October of 2023, but no further progress has been made (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/3093>)
- Bill will be considered “dead” if not passed before January 2025, and will have to be reintroduced

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Co-Sponsor the Healthy Meals Help Kids Learn Act, that provides a crucial increase in reimbursable rates for school meals.

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ENDORSEMENTS

