

June 30, 2025

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

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

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

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

Dear Chairs Collins and Cole and Ranking Members Murray and DeLauro,

As work on the Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 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 the 2024 updates to the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) nutrition standards and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food package. Additionally, we urge you to bolster funding for these critical programs to ensure they can reach their full potential of supporting children's health.

Strong school meal nutrition standards remain one of the most important public health achievements in decades. A 2021 study found school meals to be the healthiest source of food for children—more nutritious than grocery stores, restaurants, and other food sources.<sup>1</sup> This study predated the added sugars limits in school meals set to be implemented this summer; thus, school meals are about to be even healthier.<sup>2</sup>

The undersigned organizations strongly support the Congressionally mandated U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) rule updating the school nutrition standards, including the first-ever added sugars limit, and strongly oppose policy riders or report language that block or weaken implementation of these evidence-based nutrition standards in the NSLP and SBP.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, we oppose special interests' efforts to undermine evidence-based nutrition in schools, including providing exceptions for certain products from having to meet nutrition standards, such as cheese and whole milk.

Over the past decade, opponents have claimed that compliance with evidence-based nutrition standards is not possible due to mounting challenges. Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that many schools are already meeting, and in some cases, exceeding these updated nutrition

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of Agriculture. Implementation Timeline for Updated Nutrition Requirements in School Meals. June 2024. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/school-nutrition-standards-updates/implementation-timeline-school-meals>. Accessed May 28, 2025.

<sup>3</sup> 89 Fed. Reg. 31962. Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent with the 2020-2025 DGAs.

standards, serving healthy, delicious, and now more nutritious meals to their students.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>6,7</sup>

However, school nutrition programs continue to face rising food costs, labor shortages, and increasing public criticism. As the administration pursues policies outlined in MAHA efforts, it is important to ensure these programs have the resources they need to be successful. Several solutions and supportive programs already exist and must be maintained and expanded. For example:

- In 2022, USDA launched the \$100 million **Healthy Meals Incentive Initiative** with the goal of improving the nutritional quality of school meals.<sup>8</sup> In 2024, USDA announced additional grants to continue investing in schools' efforts to serve nutritious and delicious meals, especially through food producer partnerships, including with local farmers.<sup>9</sup> Set to expire this September, Congress must renew funding for the Healthy Meals Incentive Initiative, including the School Food System Transformation Challenge Sub-Grants. These grants allow for freshly prepared and locally sourced meals in schools, benefiting rural farmers and producers and schoolchildren simultaneously.
- From 2021-2023, Congress increased funding for **Team Nutrition**, USDA's training and technical assistance for school nutrition program, cut funding to \$18,004,000 in the FY24 omnibus, then maintained this funding level through FY25.<sup>10</sup> Currently, Team Nutrition is set to receive this same amount for FY26. We urge Congress to increase Team Nutrition funding to \$23,162,000 to continue supporting schools through training, education, and sharing of best practices.
- **School kitchen equipment grants** are transformational to support schools in producing more made-from-scratch meals yet the House agriculture appropriations bill flat-funds kitchen equipment funding at \$10 million. We urge Congress to provide at least \$30 million for school kitchen equipment grants to further ensure the future success of school meals programs while combatting inflation.

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<sup>4</sup> 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 28, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Chapman LE, et al. Nutrient Content and Compliance with Sodium Standards in Elementary School Meals in the United States Pre- and Post-COVID-19. *Nutrients*. 2022;14(24):5386.

<sup>6</sup> 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 March 21, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> 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 March 21, 2025.

<sup>8</sup> United States Department of Agriculture. USDA Announces Steps To Improve Child Health through Nutritious School Meals. February 2023. <https://www.usda.gov/about-usda/news/press-releases/2023/02/03/usda-announces-steps-improve-child-health-through-nutritious-school-meals>. Accessed March 21, 2025.

<sup>9</sup> United States Department of Agriculture. FNS Announces \$26 Million of Investments in School Meal Programs. May 2024. [https://www.legistorm.com/stormfeed/view\\_rss/4612801/organization/95352/title/fns-announces-26-million-of-investments-in-school-meal-programs.html](https://www.legistorm.com/stormfeed/view_rss/4612801/organization/95352/title/fns-announces-26-million-of-investments-in-school-meal-programs.html). Accessed March 21, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> United States Department of Agriculture. Team Nutrition. May 2025. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/team-nutrition>. Accessed May 28, 2025.

- The **Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program** aid schools in procuring fresh food from local growers and producers. Recent cuts and abrupt cancellations of local food procurement programs, coupled with USDA's decision to eliminate the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreement Program have been major hits to schools already facing rising food and labor costs while directly impacting farmers' bottom lines. While the House bill proposed funding Farm to School at the minimum mandated amount of \$5 million, this is still a decrease from the \$10 million in grants that was suddenly canceled earlier this year. We urge Congress to reinstate appropriate funding, for Farm to School to support local growers and producers and help schools serve less processed foods in school meals.

The undersigned organizations also applaud USDA's 2024 update to the WIC food package as it includes critically needed changes: codifying expansions of WIC's fruit and vegetable benefit, increased variety of food options, providing seafood to a broader range of participants, increasing issuance of whole grains, and more. We support the science-based process that drives WIC's proven health outcomes and strongly oppose policy riders blocking the ongoing implementation of the WIC food package update. We also strongly oppose proposed cuts to the updated fruit and vegetable benefit, including the 10% cut within the House bill. These benefits directly provide access to fresh fruits and vegetables for WIC participants.

WIC must be fully funded to sustain these health-focused benefits for an increasing number of program participants. The current House bill does not provide sufficient funding for projected participation rates for FY26. 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 family who seeks WIC services can receive them; we urge appropriators, in partnership with USDA, to monitor trends in participation and food costs and ensure sufficient funding at the time of bill passage.

We urge you to pass an FY 2026 appropriations bill clean of riders and report language that would hinder or harm essential nutrition programs, including the NSLP, SBP, and WIC. In addition, we urge you to prioritize increased funds for the Healthy Meals Incentive, kitchen equipment grants, farm to school initiatives, and increased reimbursement for school meals programs. Thank you for your consideration and attention to these important matters.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Better Children's Diets  
American Academy of Pediatrics  
American Heart Association  
American Public Health Association  
Balanced

Center for Biological Diversity  
Center for Science in the Public Interest  
Chef Ann Foundation  
Coalition for Healthy School Food  
Community Food Advocates  
Friends of the Earth  
Healthy Schools Campaign  
National Education Association  
National Farm to School Network  
National WIC Association  
Pilot Light  
Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health