

HEALTHY SCHOOL MEALS FOR ALL (HSFMA) State Advocacy Convening 2026



SUMMARY REPORT

June 15–16, 2026 • Virtual Convening



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Healthy School Meals For All (HSFMA) State Advocacy Convening 2026 Summary Report

June 15–16, 2026 • Virtual Convening

This report was prepared by CoCreative and is offered to the CSPI and to the state advocates, coalition leaders, organizers, researchers, and partners who participated in this convening. Thank you to Suzanne and Lawrence Hess and From Now On Fund for their generous contributions that made this event possible.

About This Report

The Center for Science in the Public Interest hosted the HSMFA State Advocacy Convening on June 15–16, 2026, bringing together approximately ninety-five participants across two virtual days: state-level advocates, coalition leaders, organizers, researchers, and partners working on active campaigns from across the country. CSPI hosted this gathering as part of its ongoing commitment to supporting state-level advocacy as a field.

CoCreative facilitated the convening and prepared this report. It is offered to CSPI and to everyone who participated, and more broadly to the practitioners working to advance Healthy School Meals for All across the country. We hope it is practical, grounded, and useful.

The convening was designed as a peer learning space, workshop-oriented, application-focused, and built for honest exchange across different campaign stages and geographies. CoCreative prepared this report based on session transcripts, participant polling, and facilitator notes. We have done our best to accurately reflect what was shared by speakers and participants during the convening. Any errors or omissions in summarizing presentations, discussions, or data are our own. If something has been misrepresented, please let us know and we will correct it.

The convening operated under the Chatham House Rule. Nothing in this report is attributed to named individuals or organizations, with two exceptions. The work of the NOURISH Lab at Merrimack College and Midwest Academy, whose published research is referenced directly, are named in this report.

The convening slide deck is available [here](#).

Why We Gathered

The landscape for school meal advocacy has shifted dramatically since the momentum of the COVID-19 era and the end of nationwide federal funding for HSMFA. The challenges we're navigating now are as complex, urgent, and interconnected as ever: a hostile federal budget environment and a majority party in Congress expressing no interest in expansion, competing state priorities, campaigns at different stages of maturity, and

coalitions working hard to stay resourced and cohesive for the long haul. Nine states have passed HSMFA policies, and 38 states and D.C. have introduced legislation.

This convening was a chance to step out of the day-to-day, find one another across campaign stages and geographies, and remember that we are not working alone. The goal was to cross-pollinate strategies, surface what's working on the ground, and leave more connected and better equipped to keep pushing.

By the end of two days, we set out to have...

Connected	- Built or deepened relationships with peers across states, campaign stages, and advocacy contexts, including connections that will outlast this convening - Reminded ourselves and each other that we are part of a national community working toward the same goal — and that staying in community is itself an asset
Aligned	Developed a clearer shared picture of the patterns, challenges, and opportunities visible across state campaigns
Learned	Gathered practical lessons and honest troubleshooting across all stages of a policy campaign
Made	Generated a set of insights and strategies that reflect the collective experience of everyone in the room

Who Was in the Room

Participants came from every stage of a campaign: those still laying the groundwork, campaigns actively moving bills, coalitions closing in on a final vote or funding source, and states now focused on protecting and building on a win. National partners and researchers joined as well.

We connected in different ways throughout the convening, sometimes in breakout rooms, other times using a polling tool. To help us build a sense of our shared values and why this work matters, we asked:

"What is one value that consistently guides your life and work?"

Forty-two participants responded. Here is what came back:



DAY 1 SESSIONS

Different States, Different Strategies: Lessons from the Field

The first session offered three windows into what it takes to move HSMFA legislation, from a 15-year incremental campaign to a ballot initiative to a unanimous legislative vote. Each story surfaced different lessons about timing, coalition, data, and what moving a legislature requires. Speaker details are available [here](#).

The ballot path: staying the course

North Dakota's campaign started with a 2023 legislative attempt that fell short but produced something durable: visible public demand. With polling showing 80% support across political backgrounds, the coalition moved to a citizen ballot initiative, collecting signatures from January through April 2026 to get on the November 2026 ballot. The coalition today has over 70 organizations.

A key tension came mid-process. During the signature-gathering phase, the governor called a special session and encouraged legislators to pass the measure as statute rather than a constitutional amendment. The coalition stayed the course, choosing constitutional protection over an uncertain legislative path. When the special session failed by one vote, public pressure intensified, and the coalition's credibility was intact.

We stayed our course as a coalition. When they didn't pass it for the third time, the people were outraged, and that gave us a lot of momentum.

The incremental path: a 15-year arc, starting with breakfast

Arkansas's story is one of deliberate, patient sequencing. Beginning with Breakfast After the Bell in 2010, the campaign built a 27% increase in breakfast participation by 2022 by meeting school leaders where they were.

Early on, the campaign brought in a former school nutrition director as a dedicated advocate, someone who could speak credibly to other nutrition directors and walk through the budget math with them directly, for example, showing a school leader what 25 additional students participating would mean for their bottom line. The districts that initially pushed back hardest became some of the strongest advocates.

When pandemic-era federal waivers that allowed schools to serve free meals to all nationwide ended in summer 2022, families were again on the hook for paid and reduced-price meals, and school districts began reporting a wave of school meal debt. That debt became visible to state legislators directly, through complaints from school districts and constituents, creating political will that hadn't existed before. The campaign moved quickly on a targeted first step: covering the reduced-price copay for about 50,000 students. A Republican Senate budget leader, working alongside a Democratic counterpart, moved the legislation forward and found a funding mechanism in an existing medical marijuana tax and fee fund, originally created for cancer research that no longer needed it. Most legislators didn't realize at the time of the vote that this was the funding source, and there has been no public pushback since, in part because the connection isn't widely discussed. A new governor, persuaded that this was good politics for children and for Arkansas's food insecurity ranking, put universal free breakfast in their 2025 legislative package. It passed nearly unanimously.

We knew we couldn't do it in one giant step. The first best step was to cover the reduced-price copay. Then we just kept building.

The campaign is still collecting official participation data from breakfast's first year of full implementation, but early anecdotal reports show strong growth. That momentum, even before the official numbers are in, is what's giving the same legislators confidence to take up universal free lunch, a much higher price tag, in the 2027 session. The campaign's approach remains the same that got breakfast across the finish line: build the evidence, keep showing legislators the impact, and let the case make itself.

The data-first path: reducing the price tag before making the ask

New Mexico's path shows what's possible when you do the cost-reduction work before you make the legislative ask. Starting with Breakfast After the Bell legislation, then driving adoption of the Community Eligibility Provision (a federally funded pathway to offering free meals to all students in high need districts) across the state, the team worked alongside the Public Education Department to bring the projected cost of universal school breakfast and lunch from \$60 million per year down to \$30 million, a figure the state could absorb.

One core theory: you don't win by educating a legislator. You win by removing all friction before they decide. That meant building data packets for each legislative district: how many kids in that district were on the free and reduced-price copay, how much money that would save the community, and how much additional federal reimbursement the district would bring in by raising its CEP participation rate. Handing legislators that information let them call it their own. It meant making the argument differently on each side of the aisle. Economic benefits for conservatives. Equity and hunger reduction for progressives. This led to a unanimous vote.

When I'd go to the other side of the aisle, I'd say: here are the economic benefits in your own community. They couldn't argue with poverty within their own school districts when I had proof.

Now the work is in watchdog mode: monitoring implementation, ensuring funding keeps pace with food prices, and watching for regulatory erosion.

The 'slam dunk' exercise

Following the three presentations, participants worked through a structured exercise: think of a key legislator, map their values and self-interest, then name what conditions would need to be in place before that person would vote yes. What's your biggest gap right now, and what's one step to close it?

Breakout conversations surfaced a consistent theme across groups: participants said the gap is rarely messaging. More often, they identified a lack of data specific to their district, the need for relationships with the right messengers, or the absence of political cover from a same-party champion.

"What is one thing you're taking away from this policy conversation?"

Participants shared their takeaways via MeetingPulse. The most resonant responses, ranked by upvotes from peers:

"Don't reinvent the wheel — get resources and tools from other partners who have been successful"

"Even in politically 'ideal' situations, you still have to put in the work to show the return on investment"

"Incremental funding asks"

"Make sure everyone benefits in some way"

"Some very interesting perspective on how state SNAs are engaging in advocacy, and not underestimating the importance of basic 'how do school meals work' education with legislators"

"Connecting policy change with local narratives"

Messaging HSMFA in the Wake of HR 1 and SNAP Cuts

Before hearing from speakers, participants named their toughest messaging challenges. Their responses shaped the conversation.

"What's the toughest messaging challenge you're facing right now?"

"Lawmakers agree policy is good and important, but consistently say it's too expensive"

"We shouldn't be providing free meals to families that can afford it"

"We have too many competing priorities and need to protect food assistance for low-income people as a priority"

"We need to invest in other education needs first (staffing, buildings, etc.)"

"Our budget is likely going to take a \$174 million hit for the SNAP error rate. So coalitions and lawmakers are focusing on this. Competing priorities."

"Parents should be providing these meals"

"Our goal is to get parents to be self-reliant"

"We have [H]SMFA. Right now, we're working on messaging the need for ongoing funding for complementary investments (e.g., farm to school) with upcoming leadership changes and a tough budget year"

Speakers from Colorado, New York, and North Carolina shared what's working for their campaigns.

What's resonating

Speakers described **economic framing** as landing with **swing and conservative audiences** in ways that equity framing alone doesn't. Universal meals save families money (one state estimated \$1,200 per child per year), reduce administrative burden for schools, and put federal dollars to work locally. The pitch becomes more powerful when it's specific to a legislator's district rather than statewide.

Speakers also pointed to the **stigma argument as useful when paired with participation data**. Means-testing creates shame that suppresses participation. Universal access removes the barrier and gets more kids fed. **Showing the actual numbers** makes it concrete.

Speakers pointed to return on investment arguments as gaining ground, particularly on **reducing student absenteeism**. According to research Dr. Cohen shared, HSMFA states have seen roughly a 3% drop in chronic absenteeism, a finding that catches the attention of legislators who've taken an "other education priorities come first" stance. Connecting HSMFA to the **education conversation**, not just the hunger conversation, is opening doors.

Messenger strategy matters as much as the message, according to speakers. Parents, school nutrition directors, and students carry more weight with some legislators than professional advocacy staff does, because they speak from direct experience rather than a policy brief. State School Nutrition Associations are increasingly active in advocacy and are worth engaging as messengers, not just informants.

New York offered a specific tool worth knowing about for states where the "why feed wealthy kids" objection is strongest: United Way's ALICE data (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed). ALICE captures families who are above the free and reduced-price income threshold but still not earning enough to cover all basic necessities, the exact population the "wealthy families" framing erases. It also helps campaigns map where in a state CEP access is lowest, making the affordability case geographically concrete.

The strongest empirical communications finding from the convening came from Colorado's pre-election polling. Ahead of their 2025 ballot measures, voters were asked an open-ended question: what would be the most important reason for them to vote yes to fund free school meals? Fifty percent, one in two voters, said it was because no child should go hungry in school, far outpacing other reasons like taxing the wealthy, learning outcomes, or general school funding. That finding held consistently across multiple ballot cycles and across party lines, including in conservative parts of the state. The practical implication is to pick one message and not change it. Because Colorado's message never shifted between its 2022 and 2025 campaigns, the campaign reused the same TV ad, saving roughly \$60,000 in production costs. A single durable message doesn't just win votes. It makes campaigns more efficient.

Pushing back on 'it's too expensive'

The "it's too expensive" objection doesn't go away just because a campaign has a good answer for it. Legislators raise it again and again, even after hearing the same response multiple times, so campaigns need answers they can repeat indefinitely rather than a single rebuttal. Reframing the question helps: what does it cost NOT to feed hungry kids? Absenteeism, discipline referrals, teacher out-of-pocket spending on food, and long-term health costs are all real costs of not passing HSMFA. But the hard numbers needed to make that case with precision, a dollar figure for what hunger actually costs a school or a state, mostly don't exist yet. Advocates are pushing for that research; it hasn't caught up to the argument they need to make.

Showing operational savings at the school level also resonates with legislators and administrators directly managing school budgets: reduced administrative burden, fewer debt collection hours, and less paperwork adds up. Some districts have seen dramatic improvements. And when full funding isn't possible this session, incremental asks, covering the reduced-price copay, expanding CEP, often move more than the full bill.

Navigating the current federal climate

The context right now is harder than it has been in years. SNAP threats and federal budget cuts stemming from the passage of H.R.1, also known as the "One, Big Beautiful Bill", in July 2025 are consuming political bandwidth in many states. Some coalitions are in protective mode. Others are finding that the crisis environment is creating new openings with funders who are increasingly open to systems-level work.

For states that have already passed HSMFA, the current challenge is often messaging the need for ongoing investment in complementary programs such as farm to school, implementation support, nutrition quality, with leadership changes and tight budgets as the backdrop.

A speaker from North Carolina laid out the mechanism campaigns need to make explicit: the SNAP-CEP connection. In that state, 75% of schools use CEP, and CEP relies on SNAP direct certification to qualify students. When families lose SNAP, those schools can lose CEP eligibility, forcing a return to paper applications, increasing administrative burden, reducing participation, and bringing back meal debt. The same speaker described the SNAP cuts as "a wrecking ball for school access" in North Carolina. One speaker described making that causal chain visible to legislators and media as the most effective defensive move available right now.

North Carolina's approach offers a model: when H.R. 1 passed, the coalition quickly produced a white paper linking SNAP cuts directly to CEP access and school meal participation. They distributed it to partners, used it to educate legislators directly, and folded its language into targeted action alerts that mobilized their advocate network to bring real constituent stories to legislative offices. The coalition also used the moment, when SNAP cuts were already a hot topic in the state, to push the issue through media advisories. No single outcome metric was reported, but the approach let the coalition stay engaged on the SNAP crisis without diverting its core focus. The key discipline was staying in their lane: addressing SNAP cuts specifically through the lens of school meal access, rather than becoming a full-spectrum SNAP advocacy organization. That focus kept the coalition coherent and its message clear.

Building a Shared Research Agenda

The third session brought in Dr. Juliana Cohen, Professor & Director of the Center for Health Innovation, Research and Policy (CHIRP) at Merrimack College, as co-moderator to identify what evidence campaigns need but don't yet have. The format was structured as a plenary listening session to surface gaps.

What the existing research offers

Dr. Cohen has spent the past five years studying HSMFA policy across the US, working with anti-hunger organizations, policymakers, and school districts. Several findings from current research are ready to use in advocacy right now.

- **Cost and healthcare savings.** A cost calculation tool developed in partnership with the American Heart Association allows campaigns to model projected costs for their state, accounting for anticipated participation increases and federal reimbursement trends. In Massachusetts, that modeling showed HSMFA could save \$152 million annually in healthcare costs alone. A national model currently under review projects that expansion to universal school meals would avert approximately 3,500 deaths per year from cardiovascular disease and diabetes, generate over 100,000 disability-adjusted life year savings, and produce more than \$1 billion in direct medical cost and productivity savings.
- **Absenteeism.** States that have passed HSMFA have seen a 3-percentage-point drop in chronic absenteeism overall, with larger reductions in schools with higher proportions of Black students and in rural schools. Related: a reduction in hunger-related visits to the school nurse's office in HSMFA schools means kids are spending more time in the classroom. Not a dollar figure, but a concrete and usable data point for the academic outcomes argument.
- **Meal quality and revenue.** Food service directors in HSMFA states report that higher participation has generated enough additional funding to meaningfully improve the quality of food they serve. One school added a free salad bar sourced from local farms and a school garden because increased reimbursements gave them room to do more. The policy can create a positive cycle where more kids eating generates more funding to feed them better.
- **Reduced administrative burden (collecting meal debt).** Administrative cost savings came up repeatedly as a talking point campaigns want to use to help make the case for HSMFA adoption. Dr. Cohen offered a complication: at the state level, HSMFA doesn't eliminate the application process. States still need to collect school meal applications to maximize federal reimbursement, which means much of the administrative burden remains for schools not covered by CEP. In contrast to state-level HSMFA, administrative savings are real and quantifiable for schools moving to adopt CEP and when federal-level policy support reduced paperwork. A participant from a national health organization suggested the more compelling and honest framing of administrative benefits may be around meal debt: the time food service staff spend chasing unpaid balances, often through repeated robocalls, is time that could otherwise go toward staff training or scratch cooking. Dr. Cohen noted this is a promising direction to quantify in future research. She also shared preliminary, not-yet-published findings from UK colleagues evaluating London's new universal school meals program: families in debt to the school became less likely to engage with the school at all, less likely to attend parent-teacher conferences or raise concerns about their child's grades. She hypothesized similar effects would likely show up in the US if studied, though that hasn't been confirmed here yet.

Responding to common objections

"Why feed wealthy kids?" A parent survey across income levels in Massachusetts found that 42% of families already eligible for free and reduced-price meals said their child would be less likely to eat school meals if they were not free for all children. The policy protects participation among the kids it already serves. Separately, 60% of near-eligible families, those just above the income threshold, said their ability to have enough food at home would be hurt if meals were not free for all. The "wealthy kids" framing doesn't survive or hold up well when in contact with the actual distribution of families affected.

"What happens if we go back?" When states ended universal free school meals after the pandemic waivers expired, breakfast participation dropped 18 percentage points and lunch participation dropped 15 points. That's a concrete, quantified cost of de-implementation campaigns can use defensively.

Emerging research areas

Mental health outcomes are an area Dr. Cohen flagged as gaining traction with some policymakers, particularly coming out of the pandemic. The research looks at indicators like worry, anxiety, and food-related stress in students rather than clinical diagnoses, and early findings suggest real effects. It won't land with every legislature, but in states where mental health has become a priority conversation, it may be a useful door.

One participant described a study in progress in Oklahoma that illustrates the kind of district-targeted research the field needs more of: interviewing middle-income families in two school districts, specifically in the Speaker of the House's district, about what they did with the money freed up in their household budget when their school district adopted CEP. The goal is to generate constituent-level stories about household impact that can be put directly in front of a key decision maker. The findings will also be used to test messaging. This kind of locally grounded, legislator-specific research is exactly what campaigns say they're missing.

What campaigns need that doesn't exist yet

"When you think of your movable legislators and their top concerns: what are the key missing pieces of information you need to make the case to move them?"

Participants submitted and upvoted their research needs using MeetingPulse. The most resonant gaps, in order of peer support:

"More research tying HSMFA to affordability and concrete educational outcomes post-implementation"

"How families are repurposing the money they'd otherwise spend on school meals (paying off debt, utilities, rent, summer camp for their kids, etc.) — quantify how this puts money back in the pockets of families"

"I think it might help to have more concrete stats/evidence for administrative cost savings"

"How much does it cost NOT to feed hungry kids? What are the potential savings on a per-child basis?"

"Foodservice staff turnover — how do rates compare between CEP/non-CEP schools or HSMFA vs. non-HSMFA schools?"

"How much are teachers spending of their own money on food for their students? (i.e., granola bars in their desks)"

"Longitudinal data on health outcomes for children who participated in universal school meals programs"

"Chronic absenteeism is a huge discussion point in NC, and we can see lower absenteeism in schools participating in CEP vs. not — but what does that actually mean in dollars?"

Next steps

The session closed with two questions put to the group by Dr. Cohen:

"If our research center were to develop a research toolkit for coalitions to conduct research themselves, what tools or resources would you want?"

Participants submitted and upvoted their research needs using MeetingPulse. Responses included:

- Survey templates for parents, school nutrition professionals, and students
- Data specific to individual legislators about the impact of HSMFA in their own legislative district (e.g., similar to the Farm to School dashboard for California)
- Guidance on how to research monthly household savings, mental health outcomes, and decline in chronic childhood disease

"What else would be most helpful for you and your coalition to bridge research and policy?"

One additional need was surfaced from the group:

- An HSMFA-specific searchable database of existing research, organized for advocacy use

Dr. Cohen agreed to share the prioritized research list from this session with her national research team to identify where existing data can address campaign needs and where new studies are warranted. She extended an open invitation: if there is data or analysis that would help a specific campaign, reach out directly.

A monthly national research meeting brings together researchers from across the US to discuss priority areas and respond to emerging policy needs. It's low-lift and open to advocates. Dr. Cohen also offered an open invitation for advocates to ask her to be added to the group.

DAY 2 SESSIONS

Funding Multi-Year Campaigns

Speakers from Massachusetts and Colorado led this session. Both have raised significant money for sustained, successful HSMFA campaigns and shared about what works and what doesn't, from their experience. In order to understand the context participants were operating in, facilitators polled the group on two questions using MeetingPulse.

"Where are you in your campaign funding right now?"

50% Active campaign, some dedicated funding

20% Active campaign, no dedicated funding

20% Active campaign, fully funded

10% Inactive campaign or already passed

"What's your biggest funding challenge?"

"Unsure of funding sources available to help with the campaign"

"Funding centralized in one group"

"Funding for year-round lobbying rather than only a limited amount during legislative sessions"

"There aren't any campaign-specific staff at the moment. All campaign activities and funding run through our lead organizer, and are matched by staff time from other organizations"

"Knowing the most impactful way to use funding when partial funding is available"

"Competing internal priorities"

Starting honest: advocacy is hard to fund

A speaker from Massachusetts opened by acknowledging what everyone in the room already knows: advocacy work is genuinely difficult to fundraise for. It's less tangible than direct service. The timelines are long. Funders have a strong bias toward immediate, quantifiable results, and campaigns rarely deliver those in year one or two. Getting funders to stay the course requires active work to bring them along, not just a good pitch at the beginning.

That said, a speaker described three things working in campaigns' favor right now. School meals is a winning narrative: nine states have already passed legislation, which is proof of concept funders can see and respond to. The funding universe is broader than many campaigns tap: beyond anti-hunger funders, healthcare organizations, education funders, social justice and equity philanthropists, and others all have reasons to care about this issue if you connect the dots for them. And there is a growing openness, particularly given the current environment, to funding systems change rather than direct service. The scale of the challenge is becoming more visible, and some funders are responding to it.

Selling the vision, not the process

The core framing a Massachusetts speaker offered: don't ask funders to feed hungry kids. Ask them to fund the advocacy engine that will feed every child in a generation. Philanthropy isn't being asked to buy the meals. The ask is to build the political will that leads to self-sustaining programs with lasting impact.

Supporting points need to be tangible. Eighty thousand more kids eating school meals daily is a number; telling a funder that's enough to fill every seat in Fenway Park and more is a story. A family with three kids in Massachusetts saves more than a month's rent per year. These anchors create the moment of understanding that moves people from sympathetic to invested.

A specific gap a speaker named: funders often understand the vision and where campaigns are now, but struggle to see how the campaign gets from here to there. Being explicit about what progress looks like at each stage, what strategic communications and media outreach will accomplish, what coalition development will produce, how parent and student engagement will build power, helps funders track the work even when the ultimate win is still years away.

First-person narrative matters in funder conversations the same way it matters with legislators. Parents, students, and educators speaking from direct experience are harder to dismiss than advocates making a policy case. A speaker's practice was to lift up families just above the free and reduced-price income threshold, people who don't qualify but are still food insecure, because they embody the gap the policy is trying to close in a way that's immediately visible.

Handling funder objections

Funders raise some of the same objections as legislators. A Massachusetts speaker described working through three with their own donors.

- On "school meals aren't healthy": counter with nutritional data showing school meals are more nutritious than the average meal sent from home.
- On food waste: acknowledge it as a real concern, then pivot to the efficiency gains that come from reducing administrative burden, debt collection, and paperwork.

On "why feed wealthy kids": lean into stigma reduction and the story of families who fall through the cracks just above the eligibility line. On the "no": treat it as "not yet." According to the Massachusetts speaker, a significant portion of funders who initially declined came back after being invited to a legislative briefing or a school visit. Getting them close to the work changed their opinion. One approach a speaker described as consistently effective: the presumptive positive, holding funders up as visionaries and telling them not everyone gets this issue but you will. It's not flattery for its own sake. It's an invitation to be part of something that most people haven't caught up to yet.

Coalition breadth as a fundraising asset

A speaker from Colorado reframed coalition-building as a fundraising strategy. Colorado started with coalition-building before fundraising, and the coalition itself opened funding doors that no direct ask would have

opened. A union partner brought in solidarity donations from unrelated local unions, pipe fitters and others, because of shared labor values. Community foundations came on board when they saw local community organizations leading the work. National funders reached out specifically because the campaign was community-led.

Colorado directed half of its initial campaign funding to the grassroots community organizations in its coalition leadership, specifically so they had the capacity to actually lead. The pitch to funders was funding the campaign, not the organization. That distinction mattered.

A speaker also raised something that often goes unaddressed: foundations frequently don't understand what they can and can't legally do to support lobbying and advocacy. Many shy away from it entirely when, in fact, they have real options. Having lawyers and campaign finance experts available to walk funders through it has turned a lot of "we can't do this" into "we didn't know we could." For ballot campaigns, especially, this is a significant barrier worth actively removing.

Other funding sources campaigns underuse

A Colorado speaker offered a few additional angles for advocates to consider. For funders not yet ready for major campaign investments, smaller specific asks like funding a poll, a research report, a piece of communications work, keep the relationship warm and get them closer to the campaign. Some who start with a \$10,000 to \$20,000 ask come back with something much larger.

Funders not open to supporting advocacy may be open to supporting implementation after passage. That's a legitimate entry point, and it matters because defending a policy in the state budget year after year requires ongoing funder relationships, not just campaign-phase support.

Direct service nonprofits in the food space, food banks and food pantries especially, raise significant individual donations that are general operating dollars. Those can be used for advocacy and lobbying. A speaker's advice: don't be afraid to ask those partners whether they have dollars they can contribute. You may get a lot of no's, but some will say yes.

What peer exchange surfaced

"What's one funding approach or insight you're taking away?"

"Set up a steering committee for your coalition so that funders aren't exposed to the messy work of alignment"

"When you get a no, take that as a not yet"

"Bigger coalition tent = greater opportunities for fundraising connections"

"Insurance companies have foundations that could fund, same with School Nutrition Association and Feeding America affiliated state groups"

"Stay focused on one issue; invite funders to be part of the coalition, not the steering committee"

Coalition Sustainability: Keeping Campaigns Healthy for the Long Haul

HSMFA campaigns can take 5 to 15 years, and in some states, possibly longer to be successful. Two speakers anchored this session: one from North Carolina, who has been inside a sustained multi-year coalition and spoke candidly about what makes them break down, and one from the Midwest Academy, a national organizing training organization, who offered a framework for building coalitions that can hold.

What a coalition actually is

A speaker from the Midwest Academy opened with a question that generated discussion in the chat: What is a coalition? The answer they offered: A coalition is a group of groups, not a group of people. A group of people is a committee, or a clique. A coalition has to represent organizational power, meaning organizations that each bring their own membership, constituency, and capacity to the table.

The practical test the speaker offered: when it's time to take action, how many seats can you fill on the bus? If a coalition partner can only fill their own seat and maybe a neighbor's, that's a signal about what kind of power they actually bring. Building a coalition means being honest about that question and making deliberate choices about who belongs in the inner decision-making circle versus who belongs in a broader network of supporters.

That distinction, between coalition and network, came up again in the breakout room conversations. Several participants found it useful: not every organization needs to be part of the steering committee or the core coalition. Some can be part of a wider network, brought along and kept informed without holding decision-making power. Framing it that way takes some of the pressure off potential partners who feel they don't have enough capacity to fully commit.

Framing broadly enough to bring in unlikely allies

The speaker from the Midwest Academy noted that campaigns often skip the political analysis required to build truly powerful coalitions: framing your issue broadly enough to connect with groups that don't share your exact banner. An education coalition can connect its work to disability justice, mass incarceration, housing, and economic insecurity if it has a sharp enough analysis of how those issues intersect. The same logic applies to HSMFA. Campaigns that only talk to groups that already care about school meals will keep building the same coalition. The ones that grow are the ones that find the frame that connects their work to what other organizations are already fighting for.

What makes sustaining a coalition challenging

A speaker from North Carolina spoke about the recurring challenges that threaten coalition sustainability. Several came up repeatedly across breakout rooms as well.

Operations and governance are chronically underinvested in. Coalitions tend to rely on a small number of deeply engaged leaders whose administrative and coordination work gets treated as invisible labor. Meeting fatigue is real. When structures for decision-making, role clarity, and accountability aren't explicitly designed and documented, they become friction points the moment anything gets hard.

Organizational culture clashes are, in one speaker's view, the biggest challenge of all. Different organizations have different definitions of success, different senses of what a reasonable timeline looks like, and fundamentally different ideas about where authority comes from. Some organizations grant authority by virtue of expertise: the person who knows the most about a topic is the authority. Others grant it by virtue of position: the executive director or the lead organization calls the shots. When those assumptions collide, people feel either overridden or undervalued, and many coalitions haven't explicitly sorted through it.

Engagement is a constant renegotiation. Over a 10 or 20-year campaign, organizations face changing priorities and changing funding streams. People have to constantly reassess whether their participation is worth it. Coalitions that do this well find ways for members to contribute meaningfully at different levels of engagement, rather than expecting the same level of commitment from everyone all the time.

Adaptation is not optional. A speaker's framing that resonated widely: coalition sustainability is a challenge of adaptation, not preservation of the individual organizations within it. Structures that worked at the start of a campaign may not work five years in. The goal is not to protect how things have always been done, but to keep returning to the shared north star of the mission while being willing to change everything else.

The seven principles

The Midwest Academy presenter outlined a diagnostic checklist designed to help groups cultivate intentional and influential alliances. These strategic inquiries serve as a resource for coalitions to utilize in navigating internal friction and establishing long-term organizational power. These prompts target the specific structural gaps where collaborative efforts frequently stall.

Purpose: be clear about whether you're building a time-limited campaign coalition or a long-term vision coalition. That clarity shapes every other decision about who you partner with and what you ask of them.

Clear expectations: who comes to meetings, how often, and what's expected of them. A speaker made the point that coalition meetings should include members of your base, not just staff and directors. Directors have big visions and tend to underestimate what it will take to carry them out. Base members bring a different and necessary grounding.

Clear structure: who sends notes, who coordinates, how long meetings run, and how to make meetings about action rather than reporting. People rarely say they're excited about a coalition meeting. The goal is to design them so they're worth showing up to.

Effective coordination and relationships: trust takes time to build, and it's the precondition for everything else. Moving direct actions together and agreeing on strategy requires relationships that were built before the pressure arrived.

Accountability: what happens when someone stops showing up? Who has the conversation with them, and who makes the call if they need to be asked to leave? Coalitions that haven't thought this through ahead of time tend to avoid it until it becomes a crisis.

Strong campaigns: people stay committed to coalitions that are winning. A coalition with a strong, clear campaign strategy is easier to sustain than one that talks about change but isn't moving toward it.

Peer support breakout room time

Following the presentations, participants moved into small breakout groups for structured peer support. The prompt was simple: **what challenges is your coalition facing right now, and what can this group offer?** The rooms were designed as a confidential space for honest exchange.

When groups came back together, a facilitator asked participants to share lightly about any patterns that emerged in their groups. Some participants noted that coalitions at very different stages were in the room: some just starting to build structure for the first time, others well into multi-year campaigns navigating leadership transitions or member fatigue. A few themes came up across multiple rooms: how to keep coalition members engaged between sessions when there's nothing immediate to act on, how to support campaigns that are led almost entirely by practitioners with no dedicated staff, and how to navigate the moment when a key person leaves and institutional knowledge walks out with them.

One facilitator observed that there was potential for matchmaking, pairing coalitions that are still building their governance infrastructure with ones that have years of documented processes and hard-won lessons to share. If your coalition has documentation, role descriptions, governance agreements, or other artifacts that could be useful to others, please let CSPI know. We will follow up to make those materials available more broadly across the network.

Organizing and Activation: Tools and Tactics

The final content session focused on what's moving the needle on the ground. Speakers from Maine, Minnesota, and California shared what they've learned about grassroots mobilization and building organizing infrastructure for campaigns that last.

Maine: school nutrition staff as the campaign's front line

Maine's campaign didn't start with a formal coalition. A speaker from Maine described it as a fast, scrappy campaign that leaned heavily on an existing relationship with school nutrition staff. The logic was that school nutrition directors, cafeteria workers, and students are among the very few messengers that legislators in Maine find it hard to publicly say no to. So rather than centering advocacy organizations as the face of the campaign, the campaign positioned school nutrition staff as the primary voice to local lawmakers, and still does.

The pandemic was the turning point for visibility. When school buses were driving down dirt roads through forests to deliver meals to homes while everyone else was staying put, childhood hunger became impossible for lawmakers to ignore. Once school nutrition staff saw what pandemic-era universal meals made possible, a speaker explained, they did not want to go back.

Since passing school meals for all, Maine has built on that organizing foundation. They now have a school nutrition advisory group that informs policy and funding priorities, and student food councils in districts across the state. A speaker's advice to anyone in a long campaign: invest in those structures as part of the campaign itself, not after the win. Students and school nutrition staff are the best messengers and they can mobilize people when you need them.

On what's changed since passage: the campaign went back to protect funding and codify CEP language in statute, and the political environment was noticeably different from when the original bill passed with bipartisan support. A speaker noted that the 90 pieces of testimony submitted in that fight sent a clear signal, but that maintaining political will after a win requires ongoing organizing, not just a one-time push.

Minnesota: centering lived experience takes investment

Minnesota's Hunger Free Schools campaign passed in 2023 after launching in 2020. A speaker from Minnesota described the campaign's central organizing principle: centering BIPOC students and food-insecure students and their parents in campaign leadership, not as an afterthought but as a foundational commitment from the start.

Doing that well costs money, and the speaker was explicit about it. The campaign compensated partners for their time, paid \$100 per listening session to parents and youth, compensated youth organizers for community petition work, and invested in professional communications and a lobbyist alongside the grassroots work. A speaker's reflection: it's as important to budget for compensating people with lived experience as it is to budget for lobbying. Treating grassroots participants as experts whose time has value is both the right thing to do and what makes the work credible.

One practical challenge the campaign learned the hard way: building a deep enough bench of spokespeople. If a campaign relies on one or two families to testify and give interviews repeatedly, it's asking those people to re-tell difficult personal stories over and over. Minnesota created a professional video so families didn't have to do that as often — and even so, media and legislators kept wanting to talk to the same people directly. The lesson: aim for a minimum of two or three parents and two or three youth who are trained, supported, and available for key moments.

A speaker also emphasized starting relationship-building earlier than it feels necessary. By the time Minnesota's political and budget moment arrived, the campaign had years of trust built with community partners, legislative champions, and movement allies. They believed that trust couldn't have been built in the final sprint.

California: a coalition as an ongoing tactical operation

California's School Meals for All Coalition has been building for 17 years. A speaker described it as a very tactical coalition: they meet weekly, biweekly in slower periods, and are in real-time conversation about political conditions and what's happening on the ground with all 225 coalition member organizations. The coalition sends what the speaker described as a "NASCAR letter" when needed, with the full list of 225 organizations visible at the top.

Several tools the California coalition has found essential:

Lobbyists. A speaker was emphatic: lobbyists have conversations that advocates can't, they understand the nuance of what's happening in the capital in real time, and are able to adjust strategy based on credible, timely information. The California coalition has worked with the same lobbyists for seven years.

Legislative champions. Cultivating a champion who is in the right budget or committee chair position when the moment arrives is not accidental. It requires years of relationship building, and it pays off. California's wins have built on each other, with each policy creating the conditions for the next one.

High-impact site visits. Bringing a legislator to a school and letting them see kids eating, see what the food service staff are doing, and understand the program on the ground has been effective. A speaker described this as central to their legislative education strategy.

District-specific data. The coalition builds data packets tailored to individual legislators' districts, showing how the policy affects their specific constituents. Multiple participants asked for examples of this approach in the plenary discussion that followed.

A speaker also offered a hard-won insight about message discipline: when California was passing school meals for all, the coalition was laser-focused on that one ask. That frustrated some partners who wanted other food and agriculture policies elevated at the same time. But keeping the Farm Bureau from opposing the bill required not packaging it with things the Farm Bureau was against. The lesson: stay focused on the win you need, and trust that the other wins can follow. Everything California has passed since, from healthy school meals to banning food dyes to restricting ultra-processed foods, built on the foundation of that first win.

California is now in its fifth year of implementation, and a speaker described the current challenge: all of the funding is one-time money, not built into statute. Every year is a fight to get it again. That's not ideal, but a speaker said they don't expect anything different in the near term. For states that have passed HSMFA, the organizing and advocacy work never fully stops.

What else is moving the needle

"What is one organizing strategy or tactic that's moved the needle in your campaign?"

"Inviting legislators to farm to school events happening at schools in their jurisdiction"

"Cafeteria visits are key"

"Providing support for school districts to highlight the impact of the state's investment"

"District-specific one-pagers for legislators"

"Farm to school projects and funding (local food funds) bring in farmers and producers"

Threads Across the Two Days

A few themes surfaced across sessions and the conversations between them.

Local data is the lever

Generic HSMFA research doesn't move most legislators. What moves them is data about their own district: how many kids, what the savings look like for their schools, what their constituents say when you poll them. Across the successful campaigns represented in the room, each had built some version of that district-level case. Building the tools that make it accessible to more campaigns is one of the highest-leverage investments the field could make right now.

Coalition breadth creates options

Broad coalitions created more options than narrow ones across every session. Advocates spoke about the criticality of more legislative relationships, more funding pathways, more messenger options, and more local presence. The cost of coordination is high. The campaigns that have managed it well have protected the coalition's focus on one issue, created a clear structure, and been deliberate about what they ask of partners.

Incrementalism can be a strategy, not a fallback

Arkansas's path, covering the reduced-price copay, then universal breakfast, now working toward universal lunch, is one of the clearest examples of intentional incrementalism in the field. Each win built credibility, reduced the projected cost of the next ask, and expanded the coalition. The key is not treating incremental wins as endpoints.

The budget environment is hard right now

Campaigns are navigating a difficult moment: SNAP threats, state budget shortfalls, competing education priorities. Some are in protective mode. Some are finding new openings by connecting HSMFA to education and workforce conversations that have more current political oxygen. The consistent message from campaigns that have been through multiple hard cycles: don't abandon the long game because the short-term environment is tough. The wins came from people who stayed.

More research is critical

Advocates know what arguments resonate with legislators in their states. Increasingly, they are looking for research that can strengthen those conversations with compelling evidence. Questions about the cost of child hunger, the economic impact on families, and the effects on teacher retention, absenteeism, and student success represent important opportunities for further study. As momentum for healthy school meals continues to grow, so does the demand for research that equips advocates and policymakers with the data they need to make informed decisions. This is a clear opportunity for researchers and for the funders who support them to help build the evidence base that can inform policy and expand impact.

Resources Shared During the Convening

The following resources were shared by participants and speakers over the two days and do not represent a comprehensive picture of resources available on the topic:

Policy and Advocacy Resources

Resource Name	Description	Link
CSPI HSMFA Main Webpage	CSPI's primary page for the Healthy School Meals for All campaign.	https://www.cspi.org/advocacy/nutrition/school-food/...
CSPI HSMFA Fact Sheet	CSPI fact sheet on Healthy School Meals for All.	https://www.cspi.org/resource/healthy-school-meals-all
CSPI HSMFA Toolkit (2022)	CSPI's advocacy toolkit for Healthy School Meals for All campaigns.	https://www.cspi.org/resource/toolkit-healthy-school...
FRAC 2026 HSMFA State Advocacy Guide	Food Research & Action Center's state advocacy guide for Healthy School Meals for All.	https://frac.org/research/resource-library/hsmfa-sta...
FRAC State of HSMFA Report (2024)	FRAC's report on the state of Healthy School Meals for All.	https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/HSMFA-Report-202...
FRAC HSMFA Main Page	FRAC's main hub for Healthy School Meals for All resources and news.	https://frac.org/healthy-school-meals-for-all
CSPI School Food Messaging Guidance (2022)	CSPI's message testing guidance identifying 'healthy school meals for all' as a best-practice term (vs. 'universal meals').	https://www.cspi.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Sch...
National Farm to School Network Messaging Resource (2024)	Roadblocks and Responses to School Meals for All — a messaging resource from the National Farm to School Network.	https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/5c469df2395cd53c3...
School Nutrition Association: HR1 / One Big Beautiful Bill Act Summary	SNA resource explaining the impacts of HR1 (the One Big Beautiful Bill Act) on school meals.	https://schoolnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/...
School Meals for All NC	Website for the North Carolina School Meals for All campaign.	https://schoolmealsforallnc.org/
Arkansas 'School Breakfast for All' Success Story	Article describing Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance's 15-year journey resulting in School Breakfast for All passage in 2025.	https://arstrong.org/school-breakfast-for-all-an-ark...
Together for School Meals: North Dakota	Website for North Dakota's campaign	https://www.togetherforschoolmeals.org/
Session Speakers that provided “sparks” to our conversations and application	Biographies and contact information for convening speakers.	https://docs.google.com/document/d/1P8ioiVvpMWkWIqx8hnYcu5IBBI4yhSRJ4IXq0mnULXA/edit?usp=sharing

Research Reports and Publications

Resource Name	Description	Link
California School Meals for All — KIT Survey Report	A report from schoolmealsforall.org finding that the KIT (Kitchen Infrastructure & Training) program improves school meal access and quality.	https://www.schoolmealsforall.org/survey-finds-that-...

Resource Name	Description	Link
AFT Survey Shows Teachers Are Spending Hundreds Out of Pocket on Food for Kids, Classroom Supplies	A national survey that shows a substantial number of educators anticipate needing to buy food for hungry students	https://www.aft.org/press-release/aft-survey-shows-teachers-are-spending-hundreds-out-pocket-food-kids-classroom
Nourish Lab at Merrimack College	The NOURISH Lab is a school nutrition research lab within the Center for Health Innovation, Research, and Policy (CHIRP) in the School of Health Sciences at Merrimack College.	https://www.childnourishlab.org/

Videos and Multimedia

Resource Name	Description	Link
Maine Legislative Testimony Video (Full Plates Full Potential)	A YouTube video featuring legislative testimony in support of the bill to fully fund school meals — 90 pieces of testimony were submitted. The relevant segment begins just after the 9-minute mark.	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUdbYhT_zYI
Minnesota Hunger Free Schools Advocates Video (Hunger Free Schools MN)	A YouTube video featuring key advocates for the Hunger Free Schools campaign in Minnesota.	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyDnmNX6-I

Coalition Artifacts Shared by Participants

Resource Name	Description	Link
Hunger Free Schools MN Highlights Document	A Google Doc summarizing highlights from Minnesota's Hunger Free Schools campaign.	https://docs.google.com/document/d/10b3EXvCxbBi761ND...
Checklist for Purposeful and Powerful Coalitions	A checklist of critical questions to ask in support of purposeful and powerful coalitions.	https://midwestacademy.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Coalition-Checklist-Midwest-Academy.pdf

What Participants Said: Convening Assessment

Eleven participants completed the post-event assessment (12% response rate). While this represents a partial sample of the roughly ninety-five attendees, the responses offer a consistent and candid picture of what worked, what didn't, and what participants are carrying forward.

Overall, the convening landed well. Asked to rate the convening overall, most respondents (82%) gave it a 4 or 5. Asked how they felt coming out of the two days, the majority said they were encouraged, with a few reporting they felt energized. One respondent described feeling neutral.

Most left with a clear next step. Eight of eleven respondents said they left with a clear, concrete next step for their work; the remaining three said they had a few ideas in mind or were still forming one. No one left without something to act on.

"Establishing a more cohesive steering committee for our coalition and adding more structure."

"We need to evaluate and have data to prove our 5-year reduced-price copay pilot bill is effective. We need to organize that now at the outset."

"I was given a lot of suggestions on coalition members so I am excited to reach out to those organizations for support."

"Customizing outreach for particular elected officials."

The research and coalition sustainability sessions stood out. When asked to rate each session's usefulness, Dr. Cohen's research session and the coalition sustainability session drew the most "extremely useful" ratings and the most specific praise in open-ended responses.

"Juliana's presentation was incredibly insightful, and the presentation and discussion around coalition building and challenges was a great connection point."

"I enjoy every connection, conversation, and breakout room moment. I really can't identify just one. I learned from everyone on the call and LOVED the breakouts."

"I'm glad to know about these groups and people, but I don't yet feel 'part of a community.' That said, I think the opportunity coming out of this convening is finding ways to cultivate and facilitate community and collective action."

Breakout format drew mixed reviews. Several participants praised the breakout structure directly — "the timers and clear breakout objectives," "the flexibility to convene multiple states through the virtual platform" — but others pushed back on how groups were composed and paced. Two respondents specifically wanted breakout groups matched by similar political context rather than mixed across very different states:

"Better representation of red states and peer groups could be improved by having similarly situated states for a 1-to-1 or 2-to-1 ratio of breakout sessions. Working with other states that have similar challenges/opportunities will help you identify strategies that can be adapted to your state."

"I would prefer to be in fewer small breakout groups. There were times when it would have been nice to be in conversation with the full group, particularly since there weren't that many of us at the convening as a whole."

One respondent also noted that breakout conversations occasionally felt one-sided, with session presenters minimizing the specific, nuanced challenges a state was navigating — a signal worth attending to as future convenings design peer exchange.

The virtual format mostly worked. Most respondents said Zoom and MeetingPulse supported full participation, several noting they felt as engaged as they would have in person. A smaller group felt the format worked "somewhat," without pointing to a specific fix. Pacing across the two days was consistently rated as working well.

Appetite for reconvening is strong. Most respondents were highly interested in a future reconvening, with "every few months" the most common preferred cadence and virtual the preferred format. A couple of respondents were not interested in a reconvening at this time; one noted this was because she is leaving her role, not a reflection on the convening itself.

What participants wanted more of: more granular, tactical detail on what specific states did and when (e.g., earned media timing, direct mail tactics); deeper dives into funding models and cost-estimation tools for HSMFA implementation; and more full-group Q&A time to balance the small-group breakout time.

A Note on This Work

Thank you to everyone who showed up, shared honestly, asked hard questions, and offered what they've learned from their own campaigns. If you would like to connect with a specific peer you met this week, or continue a conversation that started in a breakout room, please reach out to CSPI, and they will do their best to make that introduction.

The work you are each doing to advance Healthy School Meals for All matters, especially right now. We are glad to be in it with you.