CENTER FOR Science IN THE Public Interest

Model State School Foods Bill

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) has developed an omnibus child nutrition bill that state legislators can introduce to transform their state's school nutrition environment. This bill is customizable, and CSPI is available to provide technical assistance to ensure that specific state needs are met while ensuring a strong school nutrition environment. If you have questions or are interested in scheduling a meeting to learn more, please contact policy@cspi.org

Provisions of this bill include:

- Increasing access to healthy, culturally appropriate school meals for all students
- Protecting and strengthening evidence-based nutrition standards in school meals, including:
    - Increasing the proportion of fresh and minimally processed food purchased over time
    - Eliminating synthetic dyes, certain additives, and non-nutritive sweeteners
    - Eliminating processed meat products
    - Developing sodium standards aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans
- Supporting school districts in adhering to nutrition standards for summer meals
- Requiring sufficient time for students to eat school meals
- Prohibiting food and beverage marketing on school campuses outside of school hours
- Prohibiting digital marketing of food and beverages on school-issued devices
- Increasing reimbursement rates for school meals
- Providing funding for kitchen equipment and technical assistance for school nutrition professionals
- Promoting transparency by requiring public disclosure of progress towards nutrition goals

The Impact of Bill Provisions on School Meals

School Foods Bill Provision	Impact of the Provision
Stepwise increases in the percentage of school food procurement spending on fresh and minimally processed foods, reaching a total of 75% of purchases by value five years after the bill's effective date	Improves the quality of school meals and reduces students' consumption of harmful processed foods, commonly referred to as ultraprocessed foods (UPFs). Increasing students' consumption of nutrient-dense fresh and minimally processed foods, proportionally decreasing UPF intake, could result in decreased rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease (MASLD) and some cancers.[1]
Prohibiting the use of processed meats in school meals	Processed meats are high in sodium and classified as a known carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer.[2] This provision promotes child health by decreasing students' long-term risk of heart disease, colon, and rectal cancer.

Eliminating unsafe food additives in school meals, including potassium bromate, titanium dioxide, and non-nutritive sweeteners	This provision eliminates several known carcinogens and genotoxic agents from school meals, protecting children's long-term health.[3,4]
Increasing the per-meal reimbursement rate served under the Seamless Summer Option component of the federal National School Lunch Program	Increases the resources provided to schools to cover increased labor and food costs, helping schools serve fresh, healthy, scratch cooked summer meals.
Require that schools provide students with adequate time to eat school meals in alignment with recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	Provides students with adequate time to eat healthy school meals, improving the quantity and quality of their dietary intake.[5]
Providing funding for school kitchen infrastructure, equipment, workforce training, and technical assistance to support scratch cooking	Provides school nutrition professionals with the tools and training needed to prepare high-quality, nutritious, minimally processed school meals for all students.
Prohibiting the on-campus marketing of foods and beverages that do not comply with federal competitive food standards, 24 hours per day	Protects students from commercial and peer pressure to eat unhealthy foods and prevents unhealthy dietary habits from forming early.[6]

Why School Meals?

Every day, more than 30 million children across the United States eat school meals.[7] For many, the food they eat at school constitutes up to half of their daily nutritional intake.[8] In addition to providing meals, the school cafeteria provides an important teaching opportunity; the lunchroom is a valuable venue for introducing students to nutritious foods.[9]

Federal Changes Have Resulted in School Meal Programs Falling Short

H.R. 1, or the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act," imposed drastic cuts to SNAP and Medicaid that are increasingly making access to school meals far more difficult for eligible students and families.[10] While H.R. 1 did not directly limit access to child nutrition programs, cuts to SNAP and Medicaid disrupt the eligibility pathways that connect children to the programs meant to keep them from going hungry.

Though states are already seeing SNAP cuts, much of the disruption to school meals has not yet surfaced. Schools and districts in which a high percentage of students are automatically eligible for free and reduced-price meals can receive additional funding that allows them to provide free meals to all students. [10] Because eligibility determinations hold for up to four years, many schools and districts are still operating on reimbursements that were certified before H.R. 1 was signed in July of 2025.[11]

The implications of H.R. 1 on school meals will continue to emerge over time as eligibility determinations come up for renewal. To see a graphic illustrating the interconnected effects of H.R. 1 on government nutrition programs, click here.

Concerns Over Ultraprocessed Foods in Schools

Over the past few years, public and political interest in regulating highly processed foods, commonly referred to as "ultraprocessed foods", has grown substantially. As a federal definition is not yet available, states are meanwhile defining UPFs as they wish. A Healthy Eating Research report found

that 40 state-level policy proposals targeting UPFs have been introduced since 2021, seventy percent of which either did not define UPFs or defined UPFs as foods containing a specific set of food additives.[12] While restricting UPFs eliminates some unhealthy foods, it does nothing to explicitly increase the amount of healthy and minimally processed foods in school meals, such as fresh vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. Policies to limit harmful UPFs in schools must simultaneously increase the proportion of minimally processed foods purchased so that school meals contain the healthy foods that kids need to thrive.

States Can Serve as a Critical Backstop—and a Catalyst—for Healthier School Meals

As students lose access to free and reduced school meals, the federal government rolls back evidence-based nutrition standards, and demand for UPF policies grow, it is imperative that states take action to protect and increase access to healthy school meals.

First, enacting and implementing our model bill, which includes Healthy School Meals for All (HSMFA) legislation, ensures that all kids, regardless of their household income, have access to a healthy breakfast and lunch at school. HSMFA programs have already been rolled out in 9 states and garner strong bipartisan support.[13,14]

Second, federal standards provide a floor for school meal nutrition requirements, but states have the ability to go beyond these requirements to improve the quality of meals. States can adopt evidence-based nutrition standards including codifying the USDA's 2024 added sugar limits, reducing sodium, increasing the proportion of fresh and minimally processed foods served, and requiring that à la carte foods meet competitive food standards.

Finally, school nutrition professionals are highly skilled and driven to serve healthy, culturally appropriate food to all students. However, they need adequate resources to reduce the prevalence of UPFs and provide students with fresh, scratch-cooked school meals every day. School nutrition professionals across the country report that their programs receive insufficient funding to support transformative change away from UPFs.[15] To shift the school nutrition environment towards minimally processed food and away from harmful processed foods, states must invest in school kitchen infrastructure and technical assistance.

Resources:

- Fact Sheet: School Nutrition Standards Fact Sheet
- Fact Sheet: Why the U.S. needs to invest in school kitchen equipment and infrastructure
- Report: Making Time to Eat
- Toolkit: Healthy School Meals for All
- How SNAP and Medicaid Cuts Threaten Children's Access to Federal Nutrition Programs

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For more information, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspi.org.

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