

CALIFORNIA SENATE OFFICE OF RESEARCH

MARCH 30, 2016

Federal Update -

CONGRESS ADVANCES CHILD NUTRITION REAUTHORIZATION

On January 20, 2016, the Senate Agriculture Committee unanimously passed a bipartisan child nutrition reauthorization bill, the Improving Child Nutrition Integrity and Access Act of 2016. The Senate's proposal reauthorizes for five years various child nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Summer Food Service Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. The bill, still in its draft form and without a bill number, will next be sent to the Senate Floor for full consideration. The reauthorization proposal extends federal nutrition programs that provide about \$30 billion per year in free and reduced-price meals for children and adults. The programs also provide donated commodity foods to help reduce the cost of school lunch programs.

BACKGROUND

The National School Lunch Program, a federal meal assistance program signed into law by President Harry S. Truman in 1946, operates in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. The program assists schools and agencies in providing nutritious lunches to children at reasonable prices. While the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) oversees the program nationally, in California the program is administered through the Department of Education's Nutrition Services Division.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 last reauthorized these programs. This act marked a significant effort to improve the healthfulness of school lunches and made other changes to existing nutrition programs. The act included important changes to the nutrition standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs, including:

- Established new requirements for offering fruits and vegetables every day of the week and increasing offerings of whole-grain-rich foods
- Limited calories and established standards for the amounts of saturated fat, trans fats, and sodium in meals

Other changes made to nutrition programs included:

- Expanded the After-School Meal Program to all 50 states through the Child and Adult Care Food Program
- Increased from six months to up to one year the option that WIC agencies had to certify children for benefits
- Established nutrition requirements similar to those under the National School Lunch Program for children receiving meals and snacks while enrolled at child care centers, family child care homes, and homeless shelters participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program

Implementation of the 2010 nutrition standards was controversial over new requirements regarding serving portions for fruits, vegetables, and grains, as well as overall food waste from meals served but unconsumed by students. In the past, the School Nutrition Association (SNA) and children's health advocates typically worked together in addressing school food issues. Following the implementation of the 2010 nutrition standards, the SNA criticized the operational challenges associated with the new standards, citing food waste, student participation declines, and failure to address cultural taste preferences among students.

WHY IS THIS ISSUE IMPORTANT?

The National School Lunch Program provides children with a meal containing one-third of the recommended dietary allowance of necessary nutrients, and for their parents who can purchase subsidized meals from the program, it provides a nutritionally balanced lunch at the lowest possible rate. Studies and research suggest an association between nutrition and student academic performance, in addition to improved school attendance.

For the 2014–15 school year, the school lunch program provided California with approximately \$1.4 billion in meal reimbursements, including after-school snacks.

School districts and independent schools participating in the program are directly reimbursed for the meals they serve. The most current data available from the California Department of Education indicates that in October 2015, more than 2 million students participated in the free lunch program, while more than 300,000 students received the reduced-price lunch, and more than 500,000 students paid full price for their lunches through this program.

Many students also benefit from the School Breakfast Program. Over the last three years, schools across California have increased breakfast participation among students by almost 17 percent. During this period, breakfast sites increased from 9,100 sites to more than 9,900 sites. Students even benefit from this program during the summer months, with more than 7.8 million student meals provided across California.

Key aspects of the 2016 Senate proposal include the following provisions:

- Keeping the science-based school nutrition standards largely intact but directing the USDA to revise whole-grain and sodium standards with the expectation that 80 percent of grains served will be whole grain, and the implementation of the next sodium target will be delayed by two years
- Streamlining summer and after-school meal coordination, enabling after-school meal sites to operate year-round, if they choose, through the Summer Food Service Program
- Increasing the age of eligibility for children participating in the WIC program
- Reauthorizing the Community Child Nutrition Snack Pilot program and allowing California program sponsors to serve snacks during the school year and meals during the summer months
- Allowing an additional snack for children in care for nine or more hours a day through an increase in federal funding
- Increasing and redesigning the process for verifying information in families' school meal applications. Some advocates worry that increasing the verification requirements will cause some eligible students to lose access to free or reduced-price school meals. Often, students lose meal benefits when their families fail to respond to requests for additional information due to changes in mailing address or communication not in the household's primary language.

The Senate Agriculture Committee considered the reauthorization proposal cost-neutral when it passed the committee; however, earlier this month, the Congressional Budget Office determined that the National School Lunch Program and other child nutrition reauthorization programs would add to the federal deficit by approximately \$1 billion over the next 10 years. Unless and until these costs can be ameliorated, it is unlikely the proposal will be brought to the Senate Floor.

For more information:

To read the Senate Agriculture Committee's proposal to reauthorize child nutrition programs:

<http://www.agriculture.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/WEI16005.pdf>

To read analyses of the reauthorization proposal by the Food Research and Action Center:

<http://frac.org/pdf/child-nutrition-reauthorization-2016.pdf>

<http://frac.org/frac-analysis-of-child-nutrition-reauthorization-bill/>

Written by Lisa Giroux. The California Senate Office of Research is a nonpartisan office charged with serving the research needs of the California State Senate and assisting Senate members and committees with the development of effective public policy. The office was established by the Senate Rules Committee in 1969. For more information, please visit <http://sor.senate.ca.gov> or call (916) 651-1500.

.....