

July 13, 2020

The Honorable Sanford Bishop
Chairman
U.S. House of Representatives
Appropriations Subcommittee on
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and
Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jeff Fortenberry
Ranking Member
U.S. House of Representatives
Appropriations Subcommittee on
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and
Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Hoeven
Chairman
U.S. Senate
Appropriations Subcommittee on
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and
Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jeff Merkley
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate
Appropriations Subcommittee on
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and
Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
Washington, D.C. 205

Dear Chairmen Bishop and Hoeven and Ranking Members Fortenberry and Merkley:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, which represent school superintendents and other school system leaders, we write to inform your subcommittee of the dire financial challenges facing school district nutritional programs. Our allied organizations are appreciative of Congress' diligent work in providing aid through the COVID economic relief packages, however, more federal assistance is necessary to ensure districts school nutrition programs are financially solvent in the upcoming 20-21 fiscal year.

As the nation continues to contend with impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, superintendents, principals, and school nutritional staff have been on the front lines to ensure that their school systems remain a source of healthy well-balanced meals for food-insecure students and families. To accomplish this herculean task school nutrition programs chose to keep workers employed, deliver meals to students with no additional reimbursement, and expose staff to the coronavirus with little to no funding for proper personal protective equipment. Additionally, many programs did this while maintaining fixed expenses such as salaries while taking on unanticipated expenses, such as hazard pay and transportation.

Even though schools have done a monumental job in meeting their communities' needs, social distancing guidelines, the public's fear of the virus, and mandated school closures have caused LEAs to serve fewer meals as part of the National School Lunch (NSLP) and breakfast programs (SBP). According to data from the U.S. Dept. of Ag's (USDA) Food Nutritional Service, schools served 689,462,111 total NSLP and SBP meals in March 2019, which resulted in approximately \$1.7B in reimbursements.¹ Compared to this year's NSLP and SBP data, in March 2020, schools served 460,242,350 federal meals, which resulted in nearly \$1.2B in reimbursements to LEAs.

¹ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/child-nutrition-tables>

Consequently, this indicates a 31% decrease in the reimbursements available to districts from March alone.²

Looking to recovery it is imperative to support school nutrition programs while protecting jobs and limited educational resources. School nutrition programs rely on reimbursement from meal service to pay for expenses and considering early reports - which show that last year between the months of March and June school nutrition programs served over 2.5 billion meals and snacks, receiving over \$5 billion in reimbursement³ - it is imperative that Congress mitigate a portion of this estimated loss by providing \$2.6B to begin covering the significant financial loss that school nutrition programs have and will continue to experience as a result of the pandemic.

Finally, our organizations opposes any language that would weaken the integrity of the Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (Cat El) program in the upcoming agriculture appropriations package. Specifically, the Cat El program affords states' the flexibility to directly certify Temporary Assistance Needy Families (TANF) students for free and reduced-price meals through their participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). If language is passed that would limit districts' ability to use direct certification, the negative impact on school district nutritional programs will be immense. This is evident by the Food Nutritional Services' data, which approximated 982,000 children would lose their eligibility to free and reduced-price meals through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) when a similar provision was proposed via regulation in the fall of 2019.⁴ Cat El policies have been in place for more than two decades, and Congress has consistently and overwhelmingly rejected efforts to make Cat El more restrictive, including during its consideration of the 2005 Budget Reconciliation and the 2018 Farm Bill.

At a time of unprecedented economic downturn, our country's goal should be to increase food security for children, not undermine their ability to access nutritional meals. For all these reasons, we urge you to reject any efforts to weaken Cat El.

Sincerely,

AASA, The School Superintendents Association
AESA, The Association of Education Service Agencies
The National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition
The National Rural Education Association

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

⁴ <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/10/17/democrats-grill-usda-over-school-meal-impact-of-proposed-snap-rule-049970>