



Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Governor:

I want to express my deep appreciation for all you do to support agriculture and nutrition security. Your partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has been pivotal in ensuring individuals and families across the country have consistent access to safe, nutritious, and affordable food. Today, I want to extend that partnership to encourage you to help schools in your State keep kids fed despite ongoing challenges associated with the pandemic, ongoing supply chain issues, and labor shortages.

The past few years have been challenging for schools, but time and time again, I have seen school nutrition and education professionals across the country rise to the occasion to ensure children had access to nutritious meals. Since March 2020, Congress has provided extensive flexibility and additional resources for these programs. Some of this support was not extended for School Year 2022-23. I am pleased that Congress recently acted to provide some relief through the *Keep Kids Fed Act of 2022*, but it is still going to be a challenging year. USDA no longer has the ability under law to allow all meals to be served without charge to families—meaning that many schools will have to collect household income eligibility applications again. In addition, schools will receive less Federal financial support.

Even though USDA now has fewer tools to support Program operators, I am committed to fully leveraging those we have by providing operational flexibilities and some additional funding to ease the transition back to standard operations. Information to help State and local Program operators transition to standard operations is available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-year-2022-2023>.

But it will take a collective effort—by Congress, USDA, States, local governments, parents, school administrators, industry, and others—to maintain the strength of our school meal programs. I urge you to prioritize support for these programs:

1. **Leverage State and local resources to support school meals.** To date, at least five States have acted to continue providing free meals to all children for the coming school year, using their own resources—Vermont, Maine, Massachusetts, California, and Nevada. Some States and localities have expanded access to free meals beyond the Federal income limits. Others are investing resources to improve training and kitchen infrastructure, expand Farm to School efforts, or incentivize the use of local foods.
2. **Seek out other Federal funds that can be used to support Child Nutrition Programs.** These funds include the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, provided by the U.S. Department of Education, and Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF), provided through the U.S. Treasury. I encourage you to collaborate with those responsible for allocating these funds to explore how they might be used to support

children and schools during this critical time. More information about how these funds can be used to support Child Nutrition is available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/additional-federal-funds-support-state-agencies-and-program-operators-transitioning>.

3. **Engage with your school districts to better support the school foodservice workforce.** Our school food professionals are unsung heroes, and their dedication and commitment to providing nourishing meals to our schoolchildren is unwavering. The Congressional Research Service recently released a report at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47199> on the school foodservice workforce, which provides a snapshot of not just front-line cafeteria workers, but also chefs, nutritionists, food preparation staff, administrators and managers. The report shows that these frontline workers are disproportionately female and non-white, and they are grossly undercompensated—with the median school foodservice worker earning just over \$15,000 per year, and 14 percent with family income below the Federal poverty line. Additionally, an FNS survey found that in December 2021, nearly three-quarters of school districts reported experiencing staffing challenges. Especially during this time of transition, we urge states and districts to develop and support a vibrant foodservice workforce, and to train and compensate these incredibly dedicated staff appropriately, to sustain a strong school meals program.
4. **Maximize the use of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and direct certification.** CEP allows schools in high-poverty areas to offer school meals at no cost to all students without the burden of collecting applications from families. It is an effective tool to reduce burden on schools and families, reduce stigma surrounding free meals, avoid unpaid meal debt, and expand the number of children eating healthy school meals. Additional information about CEP is available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/community-eligibility-provision-resource-center>.

Another great option is direct certification, which allows States to certify children for free and reduced priced meals based on receipt of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits with no action required by the household and minimal effort on the part of schools. In addition, USDA is accepting applications for new states through September 30th to participate in the Direct Certification with Medicaid Demonstration Project. Twenty-six States are already taking advantage of this option.

The stakes are high. Prior to the pandemic, parents of some 30 million students counted on school meals each day to ensure that their children would receive the nourishment needed to thrive. For many of those children, school breakfast and lunch make up about half of what they eat every day, and we know that access to nutritious meals sets them up for success in the classroom.

USDA is committed to supporting these programs and those who operate them for the long-term, and I thank you for your continued partnership as we work to nourish the next generation. Please reach out to your USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Regional Office for more information about any of these opportunities.

Sincerely,

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary