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May 5, 2023

School Meals Policy Division
Food and Nutrition Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1320 Braddock Place
Alexandria, VA

Re: Docket Number FNS-2022-0044

Dear Michelle Frey:

The American Heart Association (AHA) is pleased to support and provide comments on the proposed rule, Child Nutrition Programs: Community Eligibility Provision-Increasing Options for Schools.

School meals are a critical part of a student's learning environment and are one of the healthiest sources of food for school-age children.ⁱ For the children who participate in both breakfast and lunch, school meals can provide more than half of the calories they consume in a day.ⁱⁱ The pandemic underscored the value of school meals not only for those who were previously eligible for free and reduced-price meals, but for all children to grow and thrive.ⁱⁱⁱ

While the AHA prefers implementing Healthy School Meals for All (HSMFA) nation-wide, we recognize that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) does not have that authority and appreciates the Department using the Congressionally mandated flexibilities to increase access to the school meals program by lowering the Individual Student Percentage (ISP) threshold in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Lowering the ISP from 40 percent to 25 percent will give an additional nine million students access to free school meals.

Since its implementation, CEP has been instrumental in ensuring all students in eligible schools have access to nutritious meals. CEP has shown to:

- improve attendance rates;
- improve grades;
- increase school meal participation;
- help eliminate stigma;
- reduce child hunger;
- help families;
- reduce administrative burden on school food service staff;
- remove draconian measures schools may take to feed children who cannot pay;
- allow programs to focus on their primary function: feeding children healthy meals; and
- negate the need to stand in line to pay for meals, allowing children more time to eat and socialize.^{iv}

As more states adopt and implement HSMFA, lowering the ISP will help states achieve this critical goal by being able to further maximize the federal funding investment in school meals. In addition, the USDA's 2019 *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study* shows that districts spend more to produce a school meal than they are reimbursed.^v Any administrative savings generated by CEP allows school nutrition departments to reinvest that funding in other areas, such as further improving the nutritional quality of meals served and expanding nutrition education and other ancillary programs and curriculum. In addition, these savings could also be used to help cover labor costs or rising food prices. Once the rule is final, the USDA should provide guidance and technical assistance to states that are proceeding on HSMFA to understand how to best maximize CEP.

While the USDA asked several questions in the proposed rule regarding how the change to CEP would affect programs, one question the USDA did not ask is how lowering the ISP in CEP would improve health outcomes. School meals have gotten healthier with the implementation of the 2012 standards.^{vi,vii} The data show that students are eating better,^{viii} and school lunch participants have healthier lunches than non-participants.^{ix} A national study found that improved school nutrition standards are associated with a decrease in obesity among students from under-resourced families.^x By increasing the availability of CEP and expanding these programs to nine million additional students, more children will see the benefit from and the improved diet quality and health outcomes associated with eating school meals.

We believe that the proposed changes by USDA will advance nutrition and food security; improve the fiscal security of school meal programs and families; and help ensure that children have the tools they need to learn and thrive.

Should you have any questions or require any additional information, please contact Kristy Anderson, Director of Federal Government Relations at kristy.anderson@heart.org.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Mark Schoeberl
Executive Vice President, Advocacy
American Heart Association

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- ⁱ Liu J, et al. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021 Apr 1;4(4):e215262. doi: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.5262.
- ⁱⁱ Cullen KW, et al. The contribution of the USDA school breakfast and lunch program meals to student daily dietary intake. *Prev Med Rep*. 2016 Nov 28;5:82-85. doi: 10.1016/j.pmedr.2016.11.016.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bylander, A., FitzSimons, C., and O'Connor, G. *Large School District Report Operating School Nutrition Programs During the Pandemic*. Food Research and Action Center. 2022. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/large-school-district-report-2022.pdf>
- ^{iv} Food Research and Action Center. *Community Eligibility: The Key to Hunger-Free Schools*. 2022. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/cep-report-2022.pdf>
- ^v Food and Nutrition Service and Mathematica Policy Research. *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study Summary of Findings*. 2019. https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNMCS_Summary-Findings.pdf
- ^{vi} U.S. Department of Agriculture; Food and Nutrition Service. U.S. Department of Agriculture; Food and Nutrition Services. *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study*. 2020. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition-andmeal-cost-study>.
- ^{vii} Johnson DB, Podrabsky M, Rocha A and Otten JJ. Effect of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act on the Nutritional Quality of Meals Selected by Students and School Lunch Participation Rates. *JAMA Pediatr*. 2016;170:e153918.
- ^{viii} Micha R, Karageorgou D, Bakogianni I, Trichia E, Whitsel LP, Story M, Peñalvo JL and Mozaffarian D. Effectiveness of school food environment policies on children's dietary behaviors: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS One*. 2018;13:e0194555.
- ^{ix} U.S. Department of Agriculture; Food and Nutrition Service. U.S. Department of Agriculture; Food and Nutrition Services. *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study*. 2020. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition-andmeal-cost-study>.
- ^x Taber DR, Chriqui JF, Powell L and Chaloupka FJ. Association between state laws governing school meal nutrition content and student weight status: implications for new USDA school meal standards. *JAMA Pediatr*. 2013;167:513-9.