Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

November 15, 2026

The Honorable Brooke L. Rollins
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Rollins:

We are writing regarding the growing financial challenges facing schools, child care providers, and summer food service sponsors participating in federal child nutrition programs. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which served on average 30 million children in Fiscal Year (FY) 2025,[1] and the School Breakfast Program (SBP), which served 15.7 million children,[2] are critical lifelines for families across the country. Millions of working families rely on school meals to keep their children healthy and fed during the school day, especially as meals served at schools are often the most nutritious foods children consume on a daily basis.[3] Further, several other child nutrition programs, including the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), are instrumental in providing children, including the youngest and most vulnerable, nutritious food in and outside the classroom.[4]

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA or the Department) provides reimbursements to schools that participate in federal school meal programs, but reimbursement rates are currently insufficient to cover costs.[5] Federal reimbursement rates have not kept up with rising food costs, labor, fuel, equipment, and operating costs.[6] Reimbursement rates were already inadequate prior to recent price shocks exacerbated by President Trump's various trade wars and the war in Iran. In fact, 35 percent of school meal programs operated at a deficit at the end of School Year (SY) 2023-2024.[7]

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[1] U.S. Dep't of Agric., Food & Nutrition Admin., *National School Lunch Program: Participation And Lunches Served* (Oct. 9, 2026), https://fna-bwbufwdzbabpezgc.z01.azurefd.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/slsummar-10.pdf.
[2] U.S. Dep't of Agric. Food and Nutrition Admin., *National School Breakfast Program: Participation And Lunches Served* (Oct. 9, 2026), https://fna-bwbufwdzbabpezgc.z01.azurefd.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/sbsummar-10.pdf.
[3] U.S. Dep't of Agric., Food & Nutrition Admin., *Updates to the School Nutrition Standards* (Sept. 2, 2026), https://www.fna.usda.gov/cn/school-nutrition-standards-updates.
[4] Nat'l CACFP Ass'n., *SUN Meals* (last visited Nov. 9, 2026), https://www.cacfp.org/sun-meals/; Lisa Mack, *Supporting Kids' Nutrition Security Through CACFP*, State of Childhood Obesity (Mar. 13, 2023), https://stateofchildhoodobesity.org/supporting-kids-nutrition-security-through-cacfp/.
[5] Christopher W. Logan, et al., *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study Final Report Volume 3: School Meal Costs and Revenues* 60-64, U.S. Dep't of Agric., Food & Nutrition Serv. (Apr. 2019), https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNMCS-Volume3.pdf.
[6] *Id.*; Press Release, Sch. Nutrition Ass'n., SNA Urges Release of Section 32 Funds for School Meal Programs (Sept. 16, 2026), https://schoolnutrition.org/sna-news/sna-urges-release-of-section-32-funds-for-school-meal-programs/.
[7] Ashley Chaifetz, et al., *Results from the Annual Survey of School Food Authorities, School Year 2024-2025* 4, U.S. Dep't of Agric., Food & Nutrition Admin. (July 2026), https://fna-bwbufwdzbabpezgc.z01.azurefd.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/ear-sfa-survey2024-25.pdf.

The Department's own studies and analyses underscore the urgency of increasing reimbursements to schools.[8] Additionally, a survey of over 400 district leaders across the country by The School Superintendents Association (AASA) revealed that 67 percent of respondents identified current funding levels as challenges in operating school meal programs, with 40 percent of district leaders surveyed forced to pull funding from other sources to cover costs.[9] School nutrition directors have noted their reliance on additional revenue beyond reimbursement rates, including a la carte sales, catering, grants, donations, and funding from the school district to make ends meet.[10]

To make matters worse, the drastic and unprecedented cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) included in the Republicans' "One Big Beautiful Bill" are already harming school meals programs.[11] According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), about 5.5 million individuals have lost SNAP benefits since the passage of the "One Big Beautiful Bill."[12] Most concerning is that 2.2 million of those who have lost benefits are children.[13] As you are well aware, eligibility for SNAP, as well as certain other programs, allows low-income students to be certified for free and/or reduced-price school meals without the need for their families to complete a school meals application.[14] By kicking families off of SNAP, even eligible families are less likely to access free school meals.

In addition, schools and districts can operate universal school meals through the community eligibility provision (CEP) as long as 25 percent of students in the school or district are directly certified, reducing stigma and streamlining burdensome paperwork for both school staff and families.[15] CEP enabled over 55,000 schools to serve free meals to all kids with less administrative paperwork in School Year (SY) 2025-2026.[16] However, as we have continuously warned, cuts to SNAP have a direct impact on CEP. When fewer students are directly certified

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[8] U.S. Dep't of Agric., Food & Nutrition Admin., *The State of Scratch Cooking in School Meals: Findings from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's School Food Preparation Study* 11 (Sept. 2026), https://fna-bwbufwdzbabpezgc.z01.azurefd.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/ear-scratchCookingSchoolMeals.pdf.
[9] The Sch. Superintendents Ass'n, *The Current State of School Meal Programs* (Sept. 21, 2026), https://www.aasa.org/resources/resource/the-current-state-of-school-meal-programs.
[10] *The State of Scratch Cooking in School Meals*, *supra* note 8, at 11.
[11] Lauren Lumpkin, *Free Meal Programs Vanish and School Lunch Debt Climbs after SNAP Cuts*, Washington Post (Oct. 22, 2026), https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2026/10/22/free-lunch-programs-vanish-bills-climb-snap-cuts-ripple-through-schools/.
[12] Dottie Rosenbaum, et al., *SNAP Tracker: People Are Losing Food Assistance as the Harmful 2025 Republican Reconciliation Law is Implemented*, Ctr. on Budget & Pol'y Priorities (Oct. 23, 2026), https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-tracker-people-are-losing-food-assistance-as-the-harmful-2025.
[13] Paige Shoemaker DeMio, et al., *Congressional Republicans' Big Beautiful Bill Threatens Access to Free School Meals*, Ctr. for Am. Progress (July 7, 2026), https://www.americanprogress.org/article/congressional-republicans-big-beautiful-bill-threatens-access-to-free-school-meals/.
[14] Food Rsch. & Action Ctr., *Cuts to SNAP Threaten the Child Nutrition Programs* (Jan. 2026), https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Cuts-SNAP-Threaten-Child-Nutrition-Programs.pdf.
[15] Shoemaker, *supra* note 13; Erin Hysom, et al., *Schools Embrace Community Eligibility as a Path Toward Healthy School Meals for All*, Food Rsch. & Action Ctr., https://frac.org/blog/schools-embrace-community-eligibility-as-a-path-toward-healthy-school-meals-for-all (last visited Oct. 28, 2026).
[16] Erin Kennedy Hysom, *Community Eligibility: The Key to Hunger-Free Schools, School Year 2025-2026* 5, Food Rsch. & Action Ctr. (July 2026), https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/CEP-Report-2026.pdf.

through programs, such as SNAP, fewer schools are able to operate CEP.[17] This leads to students at these schools losing their automatic access to free meals and schools losing federal reimbursements.[18] For schools that remain eligible to participate in CEP, operating the program may not be financially viable as federal reimbursements are based on the number of students directly certified through programs such as SNAP. Recent reporting from The Washington Post suggests that school districts are being left with no choice but to scale back CEP as a result of the "One Big Beautiful Bill's" cuts to SNAP.[19] This will only put more financial strain on many schools.

Finally, the ability of this country's schools, child care providers, and summer food service sponsors to improve the nutritional quality of the meals they serve is in grave jeopardy.[20] Although the Administration's purported Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) initiative encourages the use of whole and unprocessed foods, the fact remains that meal providers cannot rise to the occasion of meeting higher standards while also operating on shoestring margins.

For the reasons stated herein, we implore you to use all the tools at your disposal to better support child nutrition programs that are struggling. Further, we expect that you will reflect the need for any authority or additional funding for child nutrition programs in the President's budget proposal for Fiscal Year (FY) 2028-2029 as nutritious meals have consistently been proven to improve health outcomes and reduce food insecurity.[21] There is no doubt that child nutrition programs are vital for families trying to make ends meet, and we hope you will do everything you can to help them.

Sincerely,

Robert C. "Bobby" Scott
Ranking Member
Education and Workforce
Committee

Rosa L. DeLauro
Ranking Member
Appropriations Committee

[17] Mickeala Carter & Ashanti Lewis, *Congress Cuts SNAP. States Got the Bill. Kids Face the Consequences*, Food Corps (Oct. 27, 2026), https://foodcorps.org/blog-snap-cuts-school-meals/.
[18] Shoemaker, *supra* note 13; Lumpkin, *supra* note 11.
[19] Lumpkin, *supra* note 11.
[20] Letter from Ashley Powell, President, Sch. Nutrition Ass'n., and Patricia Montague, Chief Operating Officer, Sch. Nutrition Ass'n., to the Hon. Russell T. Vought, Dir., Off. of Mgmt. and Budget (Sept. 16, 2026), https://schoolnutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/Sept-2026-OMB-Dir-Vought-Letter-Sec-32.pdf.
[21] U.S. Dep't of Agric., Food & Nutrition Admin., *FNA Nutrition Programs* (June 11, 2026), https://www.fna.usda.gov/programs.