

CHILD NUTRITION DIGEST:

A Summary of Comments Submitted to USDA through Child Nutrition Reauthorization Listening Sessions



NOTE: Omissions – The following is an abbreviated version of original testimonies. The intent is to provide a summary of the requests, not thorough detail of all comments.

Common Priorities

The two most mentioned priorities were:

1. **Enact mandatory funding for Section 122: Access to Local Foods and School Gardens.** This program was authorized in the previous Child Nutrition Reauthorization but was not funded. This ask would provide funding for the existing program, including funds for kitchen facilities and training for food service staff.
2. **Increase federal reimbursement amounts for meal programs.** Some groups included a requirement for an increase in the quality of the meal, for example including more fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grain, and low-fat dairy items. Others requested that local products be purchased when possible. Still others requested an additional reimbursement for those purchasing local products.

The next three most mentioned priorities were:

3. **Improve nutritional guidelines.** This ranged from improving the quality of school meals to asking for uniform guidelines for a la carte and competitive foods.
4. **Include food systems, nutrition, and/or agriculture education.** The education component was described differently by folks, but generally included experiential learning and a holistic view of making school meals part of the larger school education program.
5. **Create a grant program for equipment purchases, including food preparation tools, storage and kitchen facilities.** Some groups also included point of purchase technology.

Less frequent priorities but mentioned multiple times were:

6. **Procurement training for food service staff,** including how to work with local farmers and include local products in bid specifications.
7. **Expand Child Nutrition Programs in rural areas.** One idea here was to expand the rural pilot program that allows cash in lieu of commodities. Another was to increase reimbursements in rural areas due to increased transportation costs and the inability to take advantage of economies of scale.

USDA LISTENING SESSIONS

Excerpts from Written and Oral Comments

National Farm to School Network

September 10th in Chicago, IL

1: Increase reimbursement for school meals that include more fruits and vegetables, locally sourced when possible. With the recent hike in food costs, the \$2.57 that is available to school districts for a free lunch is not enough to serve a healthy meal. School food service should be supported via additional reimbursements, be rewarded for using nutritious foods such as fruits and vegetables, and be encouraged to buy the freshest of ingredients from local sources when possible.

2: Establish mandatory funding for farm to school programs through Section 122. This funding for farm to school projects was authorized in 2004, but was not funded. We are requesting mandatory funding to support one-time start up expenses incurred by farm to school projects. Research from farm to school programs has shown the following:

- Farm to school programs offer a greater variety and quantity of fruits and vegetables as compared to non-farm to school meals.
- Students in the Los Angeles Unified School District showed a daily consumption increase of 1.5 fruit and vegetable servings attributable to the farm to school program.

3: Make available grants to expand school kitchen facilities. Serving fresh products from local farms in schools will require an overhaul of the “heat and serve” kitchens, for which we request funding for expanding kitchen facilities, a program that was available to schools in the early 1980s.

4: Encourage purchasing of local fruits and vegetables through the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program. The 25 schools per state selected for this program should be urged to buy from local farms and sources as feasible.

5: Institute uniform standards for all foods available on school campuses. Foods served through all outlets in schools should adhere to the same high standards, be it through school meals, a la carte items, vending machines, as competitive foods or any other avenues.

Great Lakes Farm to School Network: Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, Univ. of WI

September 10th in Chicago, IL

- 1. Mandatory funding for a federal farm to school program.** Include funding for grants to schools to provide them the labor time it takes to create business relationships and procurement procedures with local food purveyors, purchase equipment to store, process, and prepare fresh local food, plan menus based on seasonally available food, train staff as needed.
- 2. Increase school meal reimbursement rates** overall for schools, which are facing escalating food costs; and **provide local food purchasing incentives** for schools through additional reimbursement funds for local products. **HERE IS AN EXMAPLE OF COMPLIMENTARY CREATIVITY**

3. **Create a kitchen facility improvement grant program.** Again, infrastructure to make this work realistic and supported at the institutional level.
4. **Provide funding for experiential nutrition education in schools.** Teach the concept of healthy food and local food through hands on experiences for children, such as: school gardens, farm-based field trips, farmers in the classroom, tastings, etc., to help students understand where their food comes from and how it is produced. Long and short terms goals here – this work has the intent and ability to impact children’s familiarity and preferences for healthful foods today and for the rest of their lives.

Local Matters, Ohio

September 10th in Chicago, IL

1. **Mandatory funding for Section 122 to increase access to fresh local foods in school meal programs and support for school gardens.** This will support staff time and training, equipment for kitchens and school garden construction.
2. **Mandatory funding for food-based education in every school, including trained food educators.** (Two schools in Baltimore, MD have Food Educators on staff. They are experiencing the positive outcomes from their students of including food education in their curriculums.)
3. **Increased reimbursement rates for school meals, with schools required to purchase part of their food from producers from their region of the country.**
4. **Increased funding and buy-local language for procurement training in Section 115 and Technology Management & Information Systems in Section 125.** This will help support farm to table safety education for foodservice staff and directors and help develop relationships with farms to ensure the best quality product.
5. **Funding for a Kitchen Facility Grant Program to enable schools to apply for grants to renovate, update, or build cafeteria kitchens.**
6. **Expanding the rural pilot and access of rural communities to CNR programs** to enable rural schools in working communities to receive cash for local product in lieu of commodities.

Sustainable Food Center, TX

August 20th in Atlanta, GA

Our first general recommendation is that the USDA should enact policies that encourage state government and school food agencies to purchase locally produced food and implement food systems and nutrition education programs. (The remainder of this testimony focused on improvements in the WIC Program.)

1. **Enact MANDATORY money for Section 122: Access to Local Foods and School Gardens** that was in the 2004 Child Nutrition Reauthorization, but was unfunded. This will support the staff time and training, kitchen equipment, garden construction, and other eligible expenses to make this a successful way for students to not only eat fresh local food but also develop lifelong skills of growing food.
2. **Increase the reimbursement rates for school meals.** Rising costs of fuel and food make it increasingly difficult for food service to provide nutritionally adequate meals under current reimbursement rates.
3. **Expand on the rural pilot to allow schools to receive cash to pay for local products in lieu of commodities.**
4. **Provide funding for nutrition education in schools.** Teach the concept of healthy food and local food. Support farm-based field trips as part of the nutrition education to help students understand where their food comes from.
5. **Update and expand nutritional guidelines on foods sold in schools.** Schools are an educational setting, and therefore what occurs in a school carries the message of model behavior.
6. **Increase funding and enact language changes for Procurement training (Section 115) and Technology and Management Information Systems (Section 125) to educate food service on local food procurement.** Provide training or grants for training on sanitation issues, in particular how to properly cook foods to eliminate food borne illness, therefore allowing the proper preparation of whole muscle meats and other unprocessed foods. Include funds for food service to visit farms creating relationships and the farm-cafeteria link to learn about farming and food production, therefore training these foodservice workers on how to purchase for their programs.
7. **Provide funding for school food service equipment, including automated Point of Service programs.**
8. **Create a comprehensive School Nutrition Program that can provide meals to students whenever they are attending a program provided by the school,** whether during vacations, holidays, after-school or pre-school.
9. **Expand access of Child Nutrition Reauthorization programs in rural communities.** Many Northeast states face particular child nutrition challenges by their overwhelmingly rural nature.
10. **Add reimbursement for a third meal for children in programs that are open for 10 hours or more.** This would ensure access to good nutrition for children of working parents who rely on child care for extended hours.

11. **Develop recognition program that highlights the hard work of the school food service.**
Reward high school food standards with compensation to give them the budgets and tools they need in order for them to truly provide good healthy local food. Integrate them into the curriculum.
12. **Encourage Universal Free Breakfast in the classroom.** Provide grants to schools that offer this important educational support.
13. **Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Program needs to be available to ALL schools and vocabulary should be used to increase purchases from local farms.**
14. **Summer Meal programs need to require fresh fruit and vegetables from local producers.**
15. **Meal program should be integrated into whole school environment/experience.**
Financing of education to include food/school meals – incorporated as essential service into general fund tied to learning standards.
16. **OVERALL, Incorporate language changes in existing Child Nutrition Reauthorization feeding programs to encompass more local food, including:**
 - a. Commodity Distribution Program
 - b. Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program
 - c. Summer Food
 - d. Nutrition Promotion
 - e. Child and Adult Care Feeding Program

Mid-Atlantic Regional Lead Agency: The Food Trust, PA August 6th in Baltimore, MD

- 1) **Mandatory funding-** at a minimum of \$10 million- for Section 122 to increase access to fresh local foods in school meal programs and support for school gardens. This will support staff time and training, equipment for kitchens and school garden construction. Much of the cost of farm to school programs comes from one time start up expenses, such as kitchen equipment for processing the whole fresh product and culinary training of food service personnel.
- 2) **Increased reimbursement** rates for school lunch and breakfast programs, with schools participating in farm to school receiving additional reimbursement. With inflation and labor costs rising, food service personnel often have less than .80 with which to create an appealing nutritious meal for our most nutritionally vulnerable populations. This will improve financial viability and quality of school meal programs.
- 3) **Increased funding and buy-local language for procurement training in Section 115 and Technology Management & Information Systems in Section 125.** This will help support farm to table safety education for foodservice staff and directors and help develop relationships with farms to ensure the best quality product.

- 4) **WIC farmers market Nutrition Program** – \$20 million. Helps to ensure that young children will be provided with fresh healthy fruits and vegetables before they reach school and strengthens community access to healthy food.
- 5) **Nutritional Standards.** Update and strengthen USDA’s nutrition standards for meals, school vending machines and a la carte lines and create a uniform standard that applies to the entire campus and school day.

Earth Day Network, Washington, D.C. (possible collaboration) August 6th in Baltimore, MD

1. Increase Reimbursement Rates for School Lunches and Breakfasts. We urge the USDA to increase reimbursement rates for free and reduced meals in order to support schools’ ability to fully meet established USDA nutrition guidelines.

2. Strengthen Nutrition Standards for School Meals. Research shows that in most schools, lunches offered do not meet USDA standards for fat and saturated fat. We recommend that the Department of Agriculture develop a program to hold schools accountable for meeting established nutrition guidelines.

3. The USDA should establish nutrition requirements for competitive foods. We strongly encourage the USDA to establish nutrition standards for competitive foods to ensure that the school food environment contributes to a child’s well-being.

4. The Commodity Distribution Program should also help give children a balanced diet. Surplus agricultural commodities should only be distributed to schools if they meet this standard. We insist that the USDA ensures commodities sent to schools are safe, healthy, and local when possible.

5. We urge the USDA to increase support for farm-to-school programs by providing schools with training and technical assistance to implement these programs.

Farm-to-school programs connect school children with healthy food from local farms. They are a great way to teach children where their food comes from while procuring food that is fresh, local, and economical.

6. We strongly recommend that the USDA increase funding for the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable program so that it may reach as many children as possible, starting with the nation’s most food-insecure schools.

7. Increase Funding for Nutrition Education. We strongly support increasing funding for Team Nutrition’s efforts to provide nutrition education materials and grants for a greater number of children, families, and schools.

For more information on the priorities of the Community Food Security Coalition and the National Farm to School Network, please contact Marion Kalb at marion@foodsecurity.org, or 505-474-5782.

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