

# Food Research and Action Center

## Issue Briefs for Child Nutrition Reauthorization | Number 4

May 2010

### Highlights

- Participation rates in the Summer Nutrition Programs fall far below the need. Nationally, only one in six of the low-income children who participate in the National School Lunch Program during the school year also participate in the Summer Food Service Program.
- Child Nutrition Reauthorization provides the opportunity to restore previous damaging program cuts and make additional new investments that will increase the number of children from low-income families who have access to nutritious meals during the summer.
- Congress can strengthen the program by improving the area eligibility test, restoring reimbursement rates, and providing grants for transportation and start-up and expansion costs.

## How to Increase Low-Income Children's Access to Nutritious Meals in the Summer

When the school bell rings to signal the start of summer vacation, millions of children from low-income families who receive free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch at school during the regular school year no longer have access to those meals. The Summer Nutrition Programs (the Summer Food Service Program and the National School Lunch Program for summer programs) are designed to replace school breakfast and lunch during summer break by providing nutritious meals and snacks.

The Summer Nutrition Programs help reduce childhood hunger, which tends to increase during summer months.<sup>1</sup> The meals these programs provide also play an important role in combating childhood obesity.<sup>2</sup> The nutritious meals and snacks also strengthen summer programs for children from low-income families by drawing children into educational and enrichment activities that keep them learning, engaged and safe while their parents are working. The food ensures that children are able to learn and concentrate throughout the course of the summer program.

Despite their benefits, these vital Summer Nutrition Programs serve only a fraction of eligible children. Nationwide, only one in six of the children who rely on free or reduced-price school lunch during the school year also receives summer meals.<sup>3</sup> State participation varies significantly, with the top performing states serving at least one in three children who receive free or reduced-price lunches during the school year, and the lowest performing states serving fewer than one in 20 students.<sup>4</sup>

The low program participation is not an accident. It is the result of Congressional action that cut SFSP funding and made structural programmatic changes to SFSP that have decreased the number of sponsors operating the program and the number of sites where meals are available, resulting in fewer children from low-income families having access to nutritious meals during the summer. These cuts include: reducing the number of communities that are eligible to participate, lowering the reimbursement rates, and eliminating start-up and expansion funding.<sup>5</sup>

The upcoming Child Nutrition Reauthorization gives Congress the opportunity to reverse previous program cuts and make targeted new investments that will increase the number of children who have access to nutritious meals during the summer. Needed changes include:

- Improving the area eligibility test so that more children from low-income families are able to participate;
- Restoring the reimbursement rates so that schools, local government agencies, and private nonprofit organizations are able to operate the program without losing money and can provide the healthiest food possible;
- Providing support for outreach so that families know the program is available;
- Providing grants to sponsors for start-up and expansion costs and transportation to bring new sponsors into the program and allow existing sponsors to serve more children;

---

FRAC  
Campaign to End  
Childhood Hunger  
1875 Connecticut Avenue  
NW, Suite 540  
Washington, DC 20009  
202.986.2200

- Expanding to all states the California Year-Round Summer Food Pilot, which reduces paperwork and eases administrative requirements for community-based sponsors in California that serve children during both the summer and after school during the school year; and
- Providing Performance Awards to states for serving significant numbers of children from low-income families.

---

*The availability of the Summer Nutrition Programs alleviates some of the financial and emotional stress low-income families face, and means that children will continue to have a source for free, nutritious meals.*

## Strengths of the Program

The Summer Nutrition Programs ensure that low-income children from low-income families have access to healthy food throughout the summer. Meals and snacks must meet federal nutrition guidelines, thus providing children good nutrition. The Summer Nutrition Programs almost always occur in tandem with educational and enrichment programs that keep children learning, engaged and safe during the long summer.

### Summer Nutrition Helps Reduce Hunger

According to the Census Bureau and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), 16.7 million children lived in households struggling against hunger in 2008.<sup>6</sup> Hunger becomes more acute during the summer months; USDA research shows food insecurity rates increase for households with children in the summer, and the increase is even greater for states with low Summer Nutrition participation.<sup>7</sup> The availability of the Summer Nutrition Programs alleviates some of the financial and emotional stress low-income families face, and means that children will continue to have a source for free, nutritious meals.

### Summer Nutrition Supports Educational and Enrichment Programs

Providing good nutritious meals goes hand in hand with ensuring that children have constructive activities to keep them safe, engaged, and learning during the summer months. The Summer Nutrition Programs support meals served at local summer education and enrichment programs, recreation centers, schools, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, parks,

## The Summer Nutrition Programs

The two federal Summer Nutrition Programs—the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)—provide funding to serve meals and snacks to children at sites where at least half the children in the geographic area are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals; at sites in which at least 50 percent of the children participating in the program are individually determined eligible for free or reduced-price school meals; and at sites that serve primarily migrant children. Once the site is eligible, all of the children can eat for free. In areas that do not meet the 50 percent threshold, sites can only serve the children enrolled in the program, based on their individual eligibility, not other children in the community. Some summer camps also can participate.

Public and private nonprofit schools, local governments, National Youth Sports Programs, and private nonprofit organizations can participate in the SFSP and operate one or multiple sites. Only schools are eligible to participate in the NSLP, but they can provide federally-funded meals and snacks to school and non-school public and nonprofit sites over the summer, in effect acting as “umbrella sponsors.” The NSLP also reimburses schools for feeding children that attend summer school.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides the funding through a state agency in each state—usually the state department of education.

houses of worship and any other location at which children congregate for positive supervised activities during the summer.

The federal nutrition dollars help cash-strapped programs become stronger. The meals help draw children into programs that are critical for their development, health, and well-being. The programs also offer supervised activities while their parents are working. As a result, children are actively engaged in learning, combating the learning loss that often occurs during the long summer break.<sup>8</sup>

### **Summer Nutrition Can Help Reduce Obesity**

Despite the popular image that summer is a time when children play and stay active, recent studies show that this often is not the case. Many children are less active and eat lower-quality meals than they would if they had access to safe recreational programs and the Summer Nutrition Programs. A national survey of five- and six-year olds, for example, found that children—especially African American and Hispanic children and those already considered overweight—were more vulnerable to excessive weight gain over the summer than during the school year.<sup>9</sup>

## **Ways to Improve the Program through Child Nutrition Reauthorization**

Administrative hurdles and limited resources keep most children from low-income families from participating in summer nutrition programs. The following recommendations should be included in reauthorization so that more children from low-income families have access to summer meals that stave off hunger, help reduce obesity, and draw children into educational and enrichment programs that keep them learning throughout the summer.

### **Improve the Area Eligibility Test**

The best, easiest, and most frequently used way for a site to qualify for the summer food program is through “area eligibility.” If a program is located in a low-income area (as defined by school data or census data), then the site can participate and receive federal reimbursements for all the children. The current definition for low-income requires that 50 percent of the children in the area be eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. This criteria excludes many communities with significant numbers of low-income children; according to Census data, millions of low-income children live in communities that do not meet the 50 percent requirement, and it should be lowered to 40 percent.

The 50 percent threshold even bars many summer and afterschool programs that receive other federal funds. There is a 40 percent threshold in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers program (the largest federal funding source for the underlying costs of summer and afterschool programs) and for school-wide summer and afterschool programs funded through Title I.

Since the Summer Nutrition Programs are intended to support exactly these types of education programs, the inconsistency is self-defeating, because it causes federal dollars that are intended to cover the programmatic costs of providing educational and enrichment activities for low-income children to be spent on food instead or keeps low-income children from receiving the nutrition their bodies need in order to continue learning throughout the afternoon.

Finally, the current 50 percent area eligibility test is the most restrictive it has ever been. Prior to 1981, the threshold for Summer Food was 33 percent. Raising the threshold from 33 percent to 50 percent made many communities ineligible for the Summer Nutrition Programs even though they still had significant numbers of low-income children. They simply lacked a

---

*Administrative hurdles and limited resources keep most children from low-income families from participating in summer nutrition programs.*

---

**About this series**

*Issue Briefs for Child Nutrition Reauthorization* will explore various aspects of the child nutrition programs as Congress considers reauthorization. To learn more, visit FRAC's website ([www.frac.org](http://www.frac.org)).

This brief was written by FRAC Director of School and Out-of-School Time Programs Crystal FitzSimons.

Primary funding for this brief came from the California Endowment and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

large enough concentration of poverty. The change caused participation to drop by 500,000 children, from 1981 to 1982.<sup>10</sup> Making a change in the opposite direction would bring millions of low-income children back into the program.

**Restore Reimbursement Rate Cuts**

The SFSP reimbursement rates were cut by 10 percent in 1996,<sup>11</sup> making it extremely difficult for SFSP sponsors to participate in the program without losing money. A USDA report on summer food found that 73 percent of sponsors expect to lose money operating SFSP.<sup>12</sup> It is time to restore the reimbursement rates to their pre-1996 levels, indexed to inflation.

**Provide Start-Up and Expansion Grants**

Start-up funds were available until 1996.<sup>13</sup> They gave sponsors the resources necessary to begin and grow their programs. Without these dollars, it is extremely difficult to recruit new sponsors and to encourage current sponsors to serve additional sites, both of which are necessary in order to increase participation.

**Provide Funding for Transportation Costs**

In rural areas, transportation is one of the biggest barriers to Summer Nutrition participation due to the distances that children must travel to get to a site.<sup>14</sup> Providing funding to get children to Summer Nutrition Programs that offer high quality educational and enrichment activities is a vital way to support access in rural areas.

**Expand the Year-Round Summer Food Pilot**

Many organizations that operate summer programs also provide high quality afterschool programming and afterschool nutrition during the school year. The 2004 Child Nutrition Reauthorization included a pilot program that allows community-based programs in California to feed children year-round through the Summer Food Service Program. The pilot significantly reduces administrative work, because organizations do not have to operate multiple child nutrition programs, each of which requires an application and has different programmatic rules. The reauthorization should expand the pilot nationwide and strengthen it so that children can receive meals after school, on weekends, and during school holidays.

**Provide Performance Awards**

Participation in Summer Nutrition Programs varies dramatically, with the best performing states serving at least one in three children from low-income families who receive free or reduced-price lunches during the school year, and the lowest performing states serving fewer than one in 20 children. Providing performance awards to states that are doing the best job and are growing participation is an important way to encourage states to run strong Summer Nutrition Programs.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Nord, M. & Romig, K. (2006). Hunger in the summer: seasonal food insecurity and the National School Lunch and Summer Food Service programs. *Journal of Children and Poverty*, 12(2), 141-158.
- <sup>2</sup> Institute of Medicine. (2009). *Local Government Actions to Prevent Childhood Obesity*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- <sup>3</sup> Cooper, R., FitzSimons, C., Moos, K., Hecht, B. (2009). *Hunger Doesn't Take A Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report*. Washington, DC: Food Research and Action Center. Available at: [http://www.frac.org/pdf/summer\\_report\\_2009.pdf](http://www.frac.org/pdf/summer_report_2009.pdf). Accessed March 17, 2010.
- <sup>4</sup> Cooper et al., (2009)
- <sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2009). *Summer Food Legislative History*. Available at: [http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/summer/about/program\\_history.html](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/summer/about/program_history.html). Accessed March 17, 2010.
- <sup>6</sup> Nord, M., Andrews, M., & Carlson, S. (2009). *Household food security in the United States, 2008*. Economic Research Report, 83. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.
- <sup>7</sup> Nord et al., (2006).
- <sup>8</sup> Cooper, H., Nye, B., Charlton, K., Lindsay, J., & Greathouse, S. (1996). The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores: A Narrative and Meta-Analytic Review. *Review of Educational Research*, v66 n3 p227-68.
- <sup>9</sup> von Hippel, P. T., Powell, B., Downey, D. B., & Rowland, N. J. (2007). The effect of school on overweight in childhood: gain in body mass index during the school year and during summer vacation. *American Journal of Public Health*, 97(4), 696-702.
- <sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2009).
- <sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2009).
- <sup>12</sup> Gordon, A., Briefel, R., Needels, K., Wemmerus, N., Zavitsky, T., Russo, R., Tasse, T., Kalb, L., Peterson, A., & Creel, D. (2003). *Feeding Children When School is Out—The Summer Food Service Program*. Available at: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan03001/efan03001.pdf>. Accessed March 17, 2010.
- <sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2009).
- <sup>14</sup> Barbara Wauchope & Stracuzzi, N. (2010). *Rural Participation in the Summer Food Service Program*. Durhan, NH. Carsey Institute. The University of New Hampshire.