



## Improving Child Nutrition

*By Amy Winterfeld*

*Nutritious food helps children grow up healthy.*

*Federal-state programs support nutrition.*

Nutritious food helps children grow up healthy and ready to learn and sets the stage for better lifetime health. Long-standing evidence documents the developmental and cognitive benefits of adequate nutrition. Providing nutritious food for children also offers marketing opportunities for U.S. farmers.

Recognizing these connections, Congress enacted the National School Lunch Act in 1946 “to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation’s children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food.” The National School Lunch Program now serves 31 million U.S. children daily in more than 101,000 elementary and secondary schools. Additional federal-state programs include the School Breakfast Program in more than 88,000 schools, serving 11 million children daily; summer food service; after-school nutrition; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children; and child and adult care programs.

### Child nutrition today focuses on:

- Improving children’s health by providing foods with high nutritional quality,
- Combating childhood hunger, and
- Strengthening food systems to improve the availability of healthy food.

**State Action** Recent child nutrition policy innovations include efforts to improve healthy food choices in schools and underserved communities, combat hunger, and support agricultural and retail sector efforts to expand markets to distribute healthy locally grown foods.

**Improving school nutrition standards and healthy food choices** – From 2007 through 2009, 27 states enacted laws addressing school nutrition and nutrition education. Varied in scope, 2009 laws include Louisiana’s nutrition standards and performance indicators for school, child and adult care meals; Texas’ Early Childhood Health and Nutrition Interagency Council to develop a six-year plan to increase fruit and vegetable consumption and physical activity and to educate parents about nutrition; North Carolina’s Sustainable Local Food Advisory Council to assess foods served in school breakfast and lunch programs and set policies to allow food stamp use at farmers’ markets and promote urban and backyard gardens; and Vermont’s pilot program to purchase local milk and meat for school meals and maximize school use of local fruits and vegetables.

**Expanding school breakfast programs** – In 2008, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported more than 500,000 U.S. families with children did not get enough to eat. School, where children consume up to 50 percent of their daily calories, is an opportune place to meet this need. In 2009, Delaware legislators initiated a feasibility study of providing free breakfast to all public school students. Illinois enacted additional incentives to offer breakfast in nontraditional settings outside school cafeterias. Vermont legislators in 2008 required all schools to offer breakfast unless the community voted for an exemption; about 92 percent now offer breakfast.

*In 2008, more U.S. families did not have enough to eat.*

**Including preschoolers in school lunch and eliminating the reduced price** – Despite the economic downturn, Colorado legislators in 2009 expanded free school lunches to public school preschoolers otherwise eligible for a reduced-cost lunch.

**Creating farm-to-school programs** – From 2007 through 2009, 19 states enacted farm-to-school measures designed to increase availability of healthy, local foods in schools and provide marketing opportunities for local farmers. Legislation has facilitated interagency cooperation through a staff position in Oregon; created linkages between farmers and school food agencies, using websites to list locally available agricultural products in Connecticut, Maryland, Michigan, New York and Virginia; and reduced administrative barriers to local food purchases by streamlining procurement regulations and raising noncompetitive bid thresholds in Michigan.

*Farm-to-school programs connect local farmers and schools.*

**Expanding access to local foods in communities** – Starting with Pennsylvania's Fresh Food Financing initiative in 2004 and continuing in 2009 in Illinois, Louisiana and New York, state laws are bringing markets that stock a variety of healthy food to underserved communities by offering economic incentives—such as grants, loans and tax credits—to build new stores or improve existing facilities.

**Federal Action** Child nutrition programs rely on both state and federal funds. Many low-income urban children benefit from federal child nutrition programs, but a higher proportion—29 percent—of rural households participate. Recent federal actions and opportunities to improve child nutrition include the following.

**Reauthorization of the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004** – In October 2009, Congress extended funding for USDA child nutrition programs for one year. Forthcoming review and reauthorization is expected to include proposals to improve the nutritional quality of USDA school meals and to add or update standards for competitive foods served outside the school meal program. This effort could create minimum national standards without preempting high-quality nutrition rules—that, according to the National Governors Association, are already in place in 18 states for USDA school meals and in 27 states for competitive foods—or prohibiting additional state efforts to improve school food quality.

**USDA foods (formerly commodities)** – Fifteen percent to 20 percent of federal school lunch food expenditures are for USDA foods. When states provide technical assistance and training for school food service personnel, schools can procure more healthful USDA foods, choose healthier food processing methods and improve the nutritional quality of these foods.

**Funding for kitchen equipment** – Schools that operate a National School Lunch Program could apply for \$100 million in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds and, as of January 2010, \$25 million in USDA grants to purchase, renovate or replace school kitchen equipment, which greatly affects schools' ability to serve children healthy, safe meals. Mississippi planned to use equipment funds to replace deep fat fryers statewide with combination oven-steamers.

*ARRA and USDA funds are available to replace school kitchen equipment.*

**Direct certification for school meals** – Children whose families participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations are categorically eligible for no-cost school meals. To enroll, students apply or can be directly certified, typically by matching SNAP records against student enrollment lists, but many small districts certify no students and need assistance to comply.

### **Contacts for More Information**

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