



# 2026 Position Paper Fact Sheet

## Increase investments in school meal programs to cover rising costs, expand scratch cooking, and provide students more fresh, local produce

Under federal school nutrition standards, school meals now meet calorie, sodium and added-sugar limits and offer students fruits, vegetables, milk, whole grains and protein. School nutrition professionals are working to build on this success, expand scratch cooking and offer more fresh, local produce, but they are hampered by insufficient funds.

Healthy foods cost more and increasingly, school meal reimbursement rates fail to cover expenses to meet standards and adequately staff and equip school kitchens.

*For about \$4.70 - less than the average price of a latte - schools must prepare a healthy lunch and cover labor, supplies, equipment and all other costs.*

SNA's national survey of school meal program directors reveals intensifying financial pressures:

- Virtually all respondents reported challenges with the **cost of food** (98%), **labor** (95%) and **equipment** (95%).
  - Compared to last year's survey, the percentage of respondents citing "significant" challenges with food, labor and equipment costs have all increased.
- 70% of respondents reported the **reimbursement rate is insufficient** to cover the cost of producing a school lunch, up from 64% in School Year (SY) 2023-24.
- More than half (51%) expressed "**serious concern**" about the **financial sustainability** of their program in three years, up from 45% in SY 2023-24.

Additionally, school nutrition standards must align with The Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs). Insufficient funds will be a barrier to meeting the DGAs' new recommendations to limit highly-processed foods and increase protein.

- 79% of survey respondents cited an "extreme need" for increased funds to expand scratch cooking and reduce reliance on ultra-processed foods (UPFs) in school meals.
- More than 93% of school meal directors also cited a need for equipment and infrastructure, more staff and culinary training to achieve this goal.
- Meanwhile, as schools attempt to source more foods locally, 69% reported higher cost as a challenge in offering local foods.

*To help school meal programs cover rising costs, expand scratch cooking and provide students more fresh, local produce, Congress should pass:*

- HR 5753, the Healthy Meals Help Kids Learn Act, to permanently increase the federal reimbursement rate for school lunch by 45 cents and school breakfast by 28 cents.
- HR 5731, the School Food Modernization Act, authorizing \$35 million annually from FY 2026-2031 for grants for equipment purchases and infrastructure upgrades.
- Bills providing funds to help school meal programs boost local food purchases and support workforce development.