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To the United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry

U.S. Senator John Boozman, Chair
U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar, Ranking Member

School Meal Overview and the Current State of School Meals

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Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today on the importance of the National School Meal Programs to our nation's school children and share some of the current program challenges. I have been asked today to talk about school meals.

Introduction:

My name is Linette Dodson, and I have the privilege of serving as the Deputy Superintendent of School Nutrition for the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), working with a committed state staff to support our local Georgia School Nutrition Programs. Before coming to the Georgia Department of Education in 2019, I served as a local school nutrition director for a Georgia school district for almost 19 years. I am a registered dietitian who took a position in my children's school district as a local school nutrition director, which led me to finding my passion, school nutrition. I have witnessed the valuable impact the national school meal program has on children at the local school district level and for the past six years at the state level.

History of the School Meal Program:

School meals are a vital source of nutrition for 30 million school-aged children across our country in approximately 100,000 public and private schools. In Georgia, over 1 million school lunches are served in over 2,300 schools. [Food insecurity is a reality for 13.5 percent of households in the United States](#) and school meals are a direct way to ensure all children have access to nutritious meals at school.

In 1946, the National School Lunch Program was founded as a matter of national security because 1 in 4 men were being rejected for military service due to malnutrition. The program was also designed to support American farmers by including the service of United of States Department of Agriculture (USDA) commodity foods as part of school meals. USDA foods continue to be a critical part of school meals.

Today our nation not only faces issues with food insecurity, but also issues related to childhood obesity that can lead to long-term health problems. Now obesity impacts potential servicemembers' physical ability to serve in the military. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) in 2021-2023](#) noted that 40.3% of adults over the age of 20 were overweight or obese (2).

School meals are an investment in our children's future, providing science-based nutrition to support their growth, development, and educational success.

Summer Meals:

It's essential to emphasize that providing school meals year-round, including during the summer months when school is not in session, is crucial to meeting the nutritional needs of our nation's children. The Seamless Summer Option (SSO) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provide meals in low-income eligible areas to children 1-18 years old. Historically SSO/SFSP service requires children be present for meals and to consume the majority of the meals onsite. The recent, permanent introduction of the flexibility of non-congregate meals being provided in rural areas has increased accessibility to children whose families were challenged to access daily breakfast and lunch service. Children having direct access to nutritional foods during the summer is crucial and SSO and SFSP meals make that possible.

Current State of School Meals

Funding for School Meals:

The meal program is primarily funded by federal reimbursement for the school meals served and that funding is associated with income eligibility of families based on current poverty rates. Household applications are

required to determine the economic status of families and whether or not the student is eligible to have their meals federally subsidized. School meals are provided and local districts submit claims with a breakdown of the free, reduced, and paid meals served to students. State agencies submit these claim requests to USDA for the districts to receive reimbursement. [The current lunch reimbursement rates are \\$4.43 for free meals, \\$4.03 for reduced price meals and \\$.42 for paid meals](#), with the potential addition of performance-based cash assistance for an additional \$.09 per meal. Free breakfast is reimbursed at \$2.37, reduced price breakfast at \$2.07 and paid breakfast at \$.39.

This funding must cover the expenses of operating the program that include purchasing food, supplies, labor and benefits, as well as equipment. According to the [2023 School Nutrition Trends Report](#) issued by the School Nutrition Association, the top three challenges school nutrition programs are facing include increased costs, staff shortages and menu item shortages. [For a student to receive free meals in the 2025 school year, a family of three would need to have an income of \\$34,000 or less](#). In my conversations with school nutrition directors in Georgia, they consistently report that increased reimbursement would greatly enhance their ability to improve the quality of the meals they provide.

Expanding School Meal Access:

School meals are the only part of the school day that is directly associated with family economic status. During the COVID pandemic, school meals were offered at no cost to children throughout the country. More children ate school meals because the economic barrier was temporarily removed.

In school year 2023, districts were required to return to evaluating family income status and charging families for reduced and/or paid price meals. Families, many of whom are just outside the income guidelines, are challenged to cover these costs resulting in growing unpaid meal charges for families and limiting access for many school children.

[Community Eligibility Provision \(CEP\):](#)

CEP allows the nation's highest poverty schools and districts to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without collecting household applications. Student meal participation significantly increases when the economic barrier is removed. In Georgia, there are currently 170 school food authorities providing school meals under the CEP option in 1296 schools. This has allowed greater student access and removed the economic stigma that is many times associated with school meals because of federal income determinations. Additionally, this frees up staff time to focus on student-centered services like nutrition education.

Many states have adopted universal free meals to improve access to school meals. The CEP threshold has allowed states to utilize federal funding and, in many cases, expand state funding to support the service of school meals to children in their states at no cost to families.

Labor and Food Costs:

Just as consumers are challenged by rising food prices, so are our local school nutrition programs. Many foods served as part of school meals are made specifically to meet the nutritional program requirements, which can result in limited availability of those products.

School meal items are required to be sourced from the United States, but limited crop production, especially for items that are required to meet the nutritional requirements of the meal pattern, result in local districts having to pay higher prices. The "Buy American" requirements that are starting with the 2026 School Year require tracking of food purchases with a targeted limit of 10% being non-domestically sourced. Post-COVID

distribution networks are already stressed, especially in rural areas. This requirement will make it even more challenging for programs to purchase necessary foods while meeting meal patterns.

Labor costs have also continued to increase, compounded by rising costs of employee benefits. Many local school districts are sourcing temporary labor to avoid having to cover staff benefits, making it difficult to sustain a trained workforce. Staff turnover not only increases labor costs, but it also creates a less efficient workforce. Effectively training staff to prepare school meals is more critical than ever.

Training a Skilled Workforce:

The complexity of the school meal program standards necessitates extensive staff training to ensure that school nutrition professionals have the ability to plan, purchase and prepare healthy school meals. Ongoing training on the regulations and requirements of the meal program is necessary for school nutrition professionals to be successful and reduce staff turnover; it also creates challenges to maintain an effective workforce. Program directors and school managers also must meet [federal hiring standards based on school system enrollment](#).

Local Foods:

School meals provide a variety of foods including whole grain rich, lean meats, a variety of fruits and vegetables and milk. All children should have access to quality, nutritious meals that include locally sourced foods, especially fresh fruits and vegetables. Using local foods has improved the quality of school meals and provided direct support for local farmers.

Although local foods have been allowed to be purchased for inclusion in school meals, the federal regulatory requirements have intimidated local school nutrition leaders. The most recent Local Foods for Schools funding encouraged local directors to expand procurement opportunities to seek new sources of minimally processed local foods. These funds resulted in distribution sources that included purchasing directly from farmers and menu expansion with new local food items being added to school menus. The additional funds also assisted with the higher cost of the food items being purchased, improving the quality of foods being offered as part of school meals.

Farm to School:

Farm to school engagement has also resulted in higher quality school meals with increased consumption of fruits and vegetables. The Farm to School grants provide additional funding to school districts to expand the scope of school meals and include farm to school engagement that goes beyond what is provided by the meal reimbursement.

Grants like the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program have introduced fruit and vegetable snacks to elementary school children, improving acceptability and consumption of those food items in the meal program. Many children do not have access to a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables as part of their meals at home, so an early introduction to these foods is important. The addition of food education helps students learn more about these foods, and often these programs help connect local farmers to their community members; students really have an opportunity to understand where the food comes from.

Kitchen Equipment:

Food production requires the use of specialized kitchen equipment. Many schools have been built with limited resources and many school kitchens have kitchen equipment that is decades old. Not having the right equipment limits the ability of staff to prepare school meals with fresh ingredients. Federal equipment grants have been a valuable source of funding for school kitchens across the nation to improve and update their

equipment resources, but these grants only scratch the surface of the need for new equipment and facility upgrades nationwide.

Georgia Innovation:

Now that I have been able to help describe the current state of school meals, I'd like to pivot to best practices that we operate in Georgia. Georgia school districts have embraced the opportunity to move forward in innovative ways, meeting the nutritional needs of their students.

The Georgia K-12 culinary culture of school meals has expanded. The complexities of the meal pattern, in addition to extensive regulatory requirements, has resulted in a shift with the focus from the federal program requirements being the standard to a greater opportunity to serve our students quality school meals that meet student expectations. School meals should look good and taste good.

Federal requirements exist with federal funding, however providing quality school meals means the incorporation of fresh local foods, applying culinary techniques, food safety standards with good customer service to create a school meal experience. Requirements must be met, but the standard should be greater than just meeting requirements and for Georgia, it is a quality school meal being provided to every student in Georgia, in every school, every day.

Our state team continues to provide multiple trainings on program requirements, in addition to culinary training and support with the expertise of three Johnson and Wales Chefs that have minimally completed their bachelor's degree. These chefs have piloted culinary support schools across our state helping districts improve the presentation and preparation of their school meals. Lessons learned from working with these local districts have resulted in monthly recorded culinary training being provided, so that even small rural school districts have access to this support.

Challenged with staff turnover, the value of these culinary training resources is being applied throughout the state. This year's culinary support schools have seen an increase of 20% in lunch participation and over 10% at breakfast by applying these culinary principles.

The Georgia Tray of the Week social media campaign was started as a way to showcase quality school meals being served in Georgia schools. Each week up to six submitted student trays are presented on Facebook for the public to vote for their favorite school lunch. Over 1 million participants have engaged to support this initiative, becoming more knowledgeable about the importance of school meals and see what is possible. "Seeing is believing" when you see the amazing examples of school meals served by dedicated local school nutrition staff.

In addition, our state agency has launched a Culinary website that contains numerous resources, including the recorded trainings, almost 300 school-tested standardized recipes and a menu planning tool. This [culinary webpage](#) is proving to be a valuable resource for building confident school kitchen teams and elevating local school meal programs.

Food-Based Learning:

Food-based learning further enhances farm to school activities by connecting classroom lessons to the meals served in school cafeterias. Georgia State School Superintendent Richard Woods created the first state agency position in 2017 for an Academic Nutritionist, to make these important classroom connections and further student learning opportunities. Using school meals and the cafeteria as part of academic lessons further expands and enforces the value of school meals as part of student education. Students who grow, taste, and prepare foods as part of classroom lessons are more likely to consume those foods.

Locally Sourced Foods in Georgia:

[\\$5.6 million of locally grown produce was incorporated from the USDA Department of Defense Fresh Entitlement program](#). In addition, Georgia received \$7.1 million in Local Foods for Schools federal funding that allowed for the expansion of local procurement and distribution, which resulted in an additional \$4.9 million of locally sourced and minimally processed foods purchased to date. These are two examples of how fresh, local food is on Georgia school menus.

Conclusion:

We have an historic opportunity to leverage the power and reach of school nutrition programs to combat the chronic health crisis plaguing our nation. These programs provide a unique opportunity to not only improve the wellbeing of children but also instill healthy eating habits that can last a lifetime.

First, let me express heartfelt gratitude on behalf of our nation's school-aged children and school nutrition professionals for the steadfast financial support provided over the past 80 years to fund school meals. This commitment has enabled significant advancements, such as expanding farm-to-school initiatives, upgrading kitchen equipment, and increasing local food purchases.

As we work together to seize this moment, I urge you to consider further expanding the investment in school nutrition programs. Increased funding would address the challenges posed by labor and food costs, ensuring that school nutrition professionals are equipped to prepare the highest-quality meals for our children. Additionally, streamlining regulatory requirements and reducing administrative burdens would allow the focus to remain on the essential mission: providing children with nutritious and high-quality meals.

The returns on this investment will be profound, touching the lives of millions and shaping the health and vitality of future generations.

Additional resources:

[GaDOE School Nutrition webpage](#)

[FRAC research](#)

[SNA 2023 Trends report](#)