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Nutrition Provisions in Economic Recovery Legislation Could Substantially Reduce Children’s Food Hardship

By Zoë Neuberger

Economic recovery legislation released Wednesday by the House Education and Labor Committee includes historic investments of nearly \$35 billion over the coming years in proven child nutrition programs that would transform nutrition assistance for our nation’s low-income schoolchildren.¹ Congress is expected to consider the proposals as part of broader economic recovery legislation. The bill’s nutrition provisions aim to address a long-standing problem that COVID-19 exposed and exacerbated: some children face periods of food hardship, which is disproportionately experienced by Black and Latino children, and can have lasting impacts on children’s health and learning.

To reduce food hardship among schoolchildren and help their families make ends meet, the legislation would:²

- Provide children who receive free or reduced-price school meals during the school year with summer grocery benefits to reduce their higher levels of food hardship during the summer;
- Expand community eligibility so that more schools serving large numbers of children with low income can provide meals at no charge to all students; and
- Allow more states to simplify enrollment for free or reduced-price school meals by using Medicaid data.

Food hardship can have lasting negative consequences for children’s health and development.³ Studies link food insecurity among children with reduced intake of some key nutrients, health

¹ U.S. House, Committee on Education and Labor, “Committee to Mark Up Build Back Better Act,” September 8, 2021, <https://edlabor.house.gov/media/press-releases/committee-to-mark-up-build-back-better-act>.

² In addition to the provisions highlighted here that would increase access to food assistance, the legislation also provides funding for competitive grants to help schools offer healthier meals. It provides \$500 million for school kitchen equipment needed to prepare healthier meals and \$634 million for other activities to promote healthier meals and eating habits.

³ Brynne Keith-Jennings, Catlin Nchako, and Joseph Llobrera, “Number of Families Struggling to Afford Food Rose Steeply in Pandemic and Remains High, Especially Among Children and Households of Color,” CBPP, April 27, 2021,

problems, behavioral issues, and mental health conditions. These problems, in turn, can lower children's test scores, their likelihood of graduating from high school, and their future earnings. Moreover, parents struggling to meet basic needs often report high levels of stress, which can have serious consequences for their children's emotional and behavioral outcomes.

Even short periods of food insecurity pose long-term risks for children. Conversely, interventions that provide access to affordable food and reduce food insecurity have been linked to better health for young children as well as long-term improvements in health and longevity, greater high school completion, and higher earnings and self-sufficiency in adulthood.⁴

Together, the nutrition provisions in the economic recovery legislation described below could help make food hardship much rarer among children by ensuring that school-age children get enough nutritious food every day of the year.

Provide Summer EBT Nationwide in Future Years

To prevent the usual summertime increase in children's food hardship, the economic recovery legislation would make summer grocery benefits available nationwide in future summers to replace the school meals that children miss when school is out. It would do so through a Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) program,⁵ similar to the successful Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) program,⁶ which policymakers created during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide grocery benefits to families to replace meals missed while schools and child care facilities were closed or providing remote instruction.

The end of the school year usually coincides with a troubling spike in childhood hunger, as children stop receiving the free or reduced-price school meals they rely on during the school year. School meals play a critical role in preventing hunger during the school year, but long-standing federal summer nutrition programs reach just 1 in 7 of the children who rely on free or reduced-price meals during the school year.⁷ As a result, children's food hardship generally rises during the summer.⁸

<https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/number-of-families-struggling-to-afford-food-rose-steeply-in-pandemic-and>.

⁴ Claire Zippel and Arloc Sherman, "Bolstering Family Income is Essential to Helping Children Emerge Successfully From the Current Crisis," CBPP, updated February 25, 2021, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/bolstering-family-income-is-essential-to-helping-children-emerge>.

⁵ Zoë Neuberger, "Recovery Legislation Could Help End Summer Childhood Hunger," CBPP, June 30, 2021, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/recovery-legislation-could-help-end-summer-childhood-hunger>.

⁶ CBPP, "CBPP/FRAC P-EBT Documentation Project Shows How States Implemented a New Program to Provide Food Benefits to Up to 30 Million Low-Income School Children," www.cbpp.org/pebt.

⁷ FRAC, "Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report," August 2020, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/FRAC-Summer-Nutrition-Report-2020.pdf>.

⁸ Mark Nord and Kathleen Romig, "Hunger in the Summer: Seasonal food insecurity and the National School Lunch and Summer Food Service programs," *Journal of Children and Poverty*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2006, pp. 141-158, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10796120600879582>; Jin Huang, Ellen Barnidge, and Youngmi Kim, "Children Receiving Free or Reduced-Price School Lunch Have Higher Food Insecurity Rates in Summer," *Journal of Nutrition*, Vol. 145, No. 9, September 2015, pp. 2161-68, <https://doi.org/10.3945/jn.115.214486>.

Supplemental grocery benefits to low-income children provided through a Summer EBT demonstration program, launched in 2011, measurably decreased food hardship and improved the quality of children’s diets. Despite its success, policymakers have provided only limited funding for this demonstration, enabling only a few states to offer it each year. But there has been bipartisan interest in more comprehensively addressing the long-standing issue of summer hunger among children.

When COVID-19 hit, policymakers established the P-EBT program, modeled on the Summer EBT demonstration. The program provides benefits on SNAP or similar EBT cards, which families can redeem at grocery stores. To date, 41 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and American Samoa have been approved to distribute P-EBT benefits for the summer of 2021 and other states can still submit a plan for USDA’s approval and issue benefits retroactively.⁹

Researchers found that among SNAP participants who received P-EBT benefits, “[D]uring the first week after P-EBT benefits [were] paid, the rate of children not getting enough to eat decline[d] by 11 percentage points — which is more than a 30 percent reduction in the usual rate in this population.”¹⁰ P-EBT’s success at reducing food hardship further demonstrates how effective an ongoing Summer EBT program could be at reducing child hunger. Moreover, now that states have implemented P-EBT, the infrastructure exists to provide summer EBT benefits on an ongoing basis.

The economic recovery legislation would make \$75 in monthly Summer EBT benefits available to low-income children nationwide for seven additional summers.¹¹ This important investment could eliminate the avoidable increase in summer food hardship that many low-income children face each year.

Expand Community Eligibility

To bring free meals to all students in more schools in low-income communities, the economic recovery legislation would make it easier for schools serving large numbers of low-income children to offer meals at no charge under the federal Community Eligibility Provision.¹²

First implemented by schools in Illinois, Kentucky, and Michigan in 2011, community eligibility has transformed how children in low-income areas receive meals at school. It lets schools offer breakfast and lunch at no charge to all students and eliminates the need for schools to collect and process school meal applications, thereby increasing participation, reducing paperwork for families, and reducing administrative work for schools. It also reduces the stigma that students sometimes associate with eating school meals and eliminates the meal fees that school districts struggle to collect from families.

⁹ USDA, “State Guidance on Coronavirus P-EBT,” September 3, 2021, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-guidance-coronavirus-pandemic-ebt-pebt>, accessed September 8, 2021.

¹⁰ Lauren Bauer et al., “The Effect of Pandemic EBT on Measures of Food Hardship,” Hamilton Project, July 2020, p. 5, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/P-EBT_LO_7.30.pdf.

¹¹ The \$75 monthly benefit would be adjusted each year for inflation.

¹² Zoë Neuberger, “By Acting Now, Policymakers Can Connect More Low-Income Children With School Meals,” CBPP, September 2, 2021, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/by-acting-now-policymakers-can-connect-more-low-income-children-with-school-meals>.

Community eligibility is associated with a range of positive outcomes for students, including better academic performance, lower student suspension rates, and more students with a healthy body mass index, a growing body of research shows.¹³

The program's reach also speaks to its success. During the 2019-2020 school year, nearly 15 million children in more than 30,000 schools and more than 5,000 school districts received free meals through community eligibility — representing more than 1 in 4 elementary and secondary students nationwide.¹⁴

The option is only available to schools with large shares of students from low-income families. For a school (or group of schools) to qualify, 40 percent or more of its students must be enrolled automatically for free school meals through a data-matching process known as direct certification, usually because their household receives SNAP or Medicaid benefits. Many other children in these schools are approved for free or reduced-price meals based on an application; few are much above the income limit for reduced-price meals.

Under community eligibility, school districts must cover any costs that exceed the federal reimbursement. Because the reimbursement sometimes falls short of covering a school's full meal costs, many eligible schools have chosen not to participate — including more than 3,700 eligible districts and more than 13,700 eligible schools in the 2019-2020 school year.

The economic recovery legislation would increase reimbursements under community eligibility; make schools in which 25 percent or more of the students are directly certified eligible for community eligibility; and create an option that allows states to participate statewide, rather than at only the school or district level. These changes would allow more schools serving low-income areas to offer meals at no charge to all students.¹⁵ The changes would remain in effect for the next eight years, which would allow the school districts that adopt community eligibility right away to complete two four-year cycles under the federal option.

Making all children eligible for free meals would simplify program administration, reduce the stigma children sometimes feel about participating in the program, and ensure that low-income children aren't left out because they don't apply. While the funding in this legislation does not allow for providing meals at no charge to all students, expanding community eligibility would mean that

¹³ Arloc Sherman et al., "Recovery Proposals Adopt Proven Approaches to Reducing Poverty, Increasing Social Mobility," CBPP, August 5, 2021, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/recovery-proposals-adopt-proven-approaches-to-reducing-poverty>; Amelie A. Hecht, Keshia M. Pollack Porter, and Lindsey Turner, "Impact of The Community Eligibility Provision of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act on Student Nutrition, Behavior, and Academic Outcomes: 2011–2019," *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 110, No. 9, September 2020, <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305743>.

¹⁴ FRAC, "Community Eligibility: The Key to Hunger-Free Schools School Year 2019–2020," May 2020, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/CEP-Report-2020.pdf> and NCES, "Table 105.20., Enrollment in elementary, secondary, and degree-granting postsecondary institutions... fall 1990 through fall 2029," December 2019, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_105.20.asp.

¹⁵ Zoë Neuberger, "American Families Plan Could Substantially Reduce Children's Food Hardship," CBPP, May 21, 2021, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/american-families-plan-could-substantially-reduce-childrens-food-hardship>.

more children would attend schools where meals are free for all students and, importantly, more children with low incomes would go to such schools.

Schools serving an estimated 8.7 million students are expected to begin offering community eligibility under the proposal, which would mean that 2 in 5 elementary and secondary students nationwide would receive free meals through community eligibility.

Expand Direct Certification

To make it easier to enroll low-income students for free or reduced-price meals regardless of where they attend school, the economic recovery legislation would allow any state to rely on Medicaid data to enroll children rather than require families to fill out duplicative applications.¹⁶

To ensure that families who are most likely to face food hardship have access to free school meals, policymakers have enabled certain categories of children to be enrolled automatically through direct certification. States or school districts match the names of children living in households that receive certain federal benefits (the most common of which is SNAP) with school enrollment records.¹⁷ Such students are approved for free meals automatically, so their families do not have to complete a school meals application. In addition to enrolling children who might not otherwise receive free meals, direct certification eliminates the burden on families of having to complete application and verification processes for school meals when the state already has data establishing their eligibility.

Under a demonstration project launched in the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, children enrolled in Medicaid and in families with income below 185 percent of the federal poverty line may be directly certified in 19 states, which include roughly 60 percent of eligible children nationwide.¹⁸ The share of students certified for free school meals rose as a result of using Medicaid data, a USDA study showed.¹⁹

The economic recovery legislation would make the use of Medicaid data for direct certification an option available to all states for the next nine years. Expanding direct certification would allow an estimated 280,000 more low-income students to benefit from direct certification's simplified enrollment process while strengthening program integrity and simplifying program administration. Expanding the data sources available for direct certification also would make it easier for schools to identify their low-income students and, thus, it would qualify more schools for community eligibility or would qualify eligible schools for a higher reimbursement rate under it.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Currently, school districts must directly certify children in households that receive SNAP. School districts can also conduct data matching to directly certify children receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations benefits; children in foster care; children who are homeless, runaway, or migrant; or children in Head Start.

¹⁸ USDA, "Demonstration Projects to Evaluate Direct Certification with Medicaid," <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/direct-cert-medicaid-demo-RFA.pdf>.

¹⁹ Lara Hulsey *et al.*, "Direct Certification with Medicaid for Free and Reduced-Price Meals (DCMF/RP) Demonstration, Year 1," USDA, August 2019, https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/Evaluation-DCM_Year1.pdf.

Conclusion

The nutrition proposals in the economic recovery legislation could usher in a new era in which food hardship is much rarer among school-age children than before the COVID-19 pandemic, reducing the risk of long-term adverse consequences associated with even short periods of food insecurity during childhood. By providing grocery benefits to all low-income children every summer, allowing many more schools serving large numbers of low-income children to offer meals free to all students, and making it easier to enroll low-income students for free or reduced-price school meals regardless of where they attend school, the proposals could help ensure that school age children get enough nutritious food every day of the year.