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USDA announces extension of summer meal program waivers, ensuring free meals for students through Dec. 31, 2020

In a win for local educational agencies and students throughout California, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue **announced** Aug. 31 that the U.S. Department of Agriculture will extend several flexibilities that allow summer meal program operators to continue serving free meals to all children through as late as Dec. 31, 2020. This will help to ensure that children have access to the nutritious food they need regardless of whether their campus is open for in-person instruction.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has made the critical role school meal programs play in ensuring that students are not going hungry abundantly clear, and we are thankful that LEAs will continue to have the ability for now to provide nutritious meals to children during this time of extreme uncertainty,” said CSBA President Xilonin Cruz-Gonzalez. “However, we are in the midst of a national child hunger crisis and school meal programs are struggling financially to maintain critical services. District and county offices of education will need more support and flexibility to make sure all children are fed beyond the end of the calendar year.”

The announcement came the same day that current waivers were set to expire, which would have had a devastating impact on the children who now more than ever rely on school meal programs as their main source of nutritious breakfasts and lunches. The waivers also allow school nutrition professionals to focus on feeding hungry children, rather than on processing paperwork and verifying each student’s eligibility to receive meals through these programs.

Specifically, USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service is extending nationwide waivers for the Summer Food Service Program and Seamless Summer Option through the end of 2020, or until available funding runs out.

These waivers:

- Allow school meals to be served in all areas and at no cost

- Permit meals to be served outside of the typically required group settings and meal times
- Waive meal pattern requirements as necessary
- Allow parents and guardians to pick up meals for their children

Collectively, these flexibilities ensure meal options for children continue to be available so children can access meals under all circumstances. Secretary Perdue said in a [press conference](#) Monday that the USDA made the decision in response to concerns shared by stakeholders about the ability to reach those in need without enlisting the help of traditional summer sites located throughout communities across the U.S.

CSBA was among a number of organizations that [wrote the USDA and Congressional leaders](#) in support of extending the waivers.

USDA has no plans to pursue additional funding to offer free meals through the 2020–21 academic year

Congress did not authorize enough funding for the entire 2020–21 school year, and USDA officials said in a press release Monday, that “while there have been some well-meaning people asking USDA to fund this through the entire 2020–21 school year, we are obligated to not spend more than is appropriated by Congress.”

The [Pandemic Child Hunger Prevention Act](#), introduced July 30 by House Committee on Education and Labor Chairman Robert C. “Bobby” Scott (D-Va.) would allow all children to access breakfast, lunch and after-school snack programs either in school or through “grab and go” and delivery options during the 2020–21 school year.

Under the legislation, all school districts, including those operating off-site services, could serve all children without having to certify students’ individual eligibility. The certification and documentation process is often cited as an unnecessary barrier in the process to delivering meals, and is especially straining during the pandemic.

“The Pandemic Child Hunger Prevention Act would help address the child hunger crisis, make it easier for schools to operate school meal programs, and provide financial relief to school meal programs that have suffered heavy losses during the pandemic,” Scott said in a [press release](#). “This legislation will ensure that all children will have access to nutrition during this public health emergency.”

A Congressional [fact sheet](#) states that, in May alone, school nutrition program directors reported a median estimated loss of \$200,000 per district, with an estimated loss of as much as \$2.35 million in larger districts. Without intervention, these struggles could seriously jeopardize the availability of nutritious meals for students who rely on them.

CSBA will continue to pursue funding for school nutrition programs in order to extend the current waivers through the end of the school year. These waivers will provide time to work with Congress to specify funding through either the federal budget process or in the next stimulus bill.



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