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State Strategies to Help Schools Make the Most of Their National School Lunch Program

Executive Summary

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is the second largest federally subsidized food assistance program, serving approximately 31 million lunches each day. Nearly all public and private schools offer the federally reimbursed school meals program, which cost the federal government \$9.3 billion to operate in 2008. Because of its reach—more than half of all school-age children participate in the program at least once a week—and because children consume as many as 20 percent to 50 percent of their daily calories during school hours, the NSLP presents an unparalleled opportunity to improve the nutritional quality of foods served to our nation's students, and ultimately improve their health.

This Issue Brief highlights the ways states can positively influence the diets of children at greatest risk for poor health by working with local schools to provide not just a reliable source of nourishment but the best nutrition possible for every dollar spent on the NSLP. In particular, it explores three key challenges schools face with respect to the NSLP and the strategies states can use to help them make the most of this important program:

- 1) *Improving the nutritional quality of meal offerings.* To improve nutritional quality of the NSLP, states can strengthen nutrition standards, use federal funds to increase school food preparation and storage capacity, provide food preparation and menu planning training to food service personnel, and facilitate connections between school cafeterias and the local agricultural community.
- 2) *Increasing NSLP enrollment rates.* To increase enrollment rates, states can encourage the use of direct certification, facilitate the use of electronic payment systems, and make competitive foods less competitive.
- 3) *Making the most of limited NSLP funds.* To make the most of limited NSLP funds, states can facilitate outsourcing to a school food service management company and create statewide or regional “cooperative agreements” for food school procurement.

Working together, states and schools can find the best solutions to help each community maximize their NSLP funds and ensure students get the best nutrition possible.

National School Lunch Program: An Overview

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is the second largest federally subsidized food assistance program in the United States, reaching 31 million children each day at a cost of \$9.3 billion in federal government funds.^{1, 2, 3} It is a valuable program to reform because of its reach—more than half of all school-age children participate in the program at least once a week—and because children consume as many as 20 percent to 50 percent of their daily calories during school hours.^{4, 5} The NSLP offers lunches to students enrolled in public schools, nonprofit private schools, and residential child care institutions.

Program Administration and Implementation

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service administers the NSLP at the federal level. At the state level, the NSLP is usually administered by state education agencies, which operate the program through agreements with school food authorities at the district level. As part of the meals program, USDA provides cash reimbursements and donated commodities from surplus agricultural stocks to schools on a per-meal basis. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) and USDA allow schools access to DOD's purchasing power and distribution infrastructure as part of DOD's Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, resulting in fruit and vegetables delivered to schools at a reduced cost.

The USDA's responsibilities under the NSLP at the federal level include providing reimbursement to states, determining commodities program offerings, and coordinating and providing technical assistance, as well as overseeing state policy. State agencies are responsible for managing the finances of the school lunch program at the state level, providing technical assistance to schools, and monitoring local school food authorities' performance and adherence to nutritional standards. Local school food authorities are responsible for serving meals, managing the administrative aspects of the program (i.e., enrolling students, processing applications, verifying student eligibility, negotiating food contracts), and maintaining data for reporting purposes.

A Shift in Program Goals

The NSLP was started in 1946, at a time when poverty-related malnutrition was a major national concern. The original goal of the school meals program was to provide low-income children across the country with a reliable source of nourishment. The goal of the school meals program today has shifted from trying to provide at-risk children with the maximum number of calories per dollar spent to providing them the best nutrition possible for every dollar.⁶

This shift in priorities of the NSLP represents a new set of challenges that schools now must navigate. Any efforts to improve the nutritional quality of school meals come with a need to improve school kitchen capacity and enhance food service personnel ability to prepare healthy meals. Many schools do not have the requisite financial resources to make these changes.

Recently, the federal government has started to address school kitchen capacity through the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act) and the USDA's Team Nutrition initiative. As part of the Recovery Act, Congress made \$100 million in federal funds available for school food service equipment grants to schools that participate in the NSLP. States received these funds based on their school meals administrative expense allocation. Local school food authorities competitively applied for the funds from states. Preference was given to schools with greater than 50 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

The School Lunch Program’s Benefits and Disadvantages

The NSLP is a major source of nourishment for many students. Research shows that students who participate in the school meals program tend to consume higher amounts of key nutrients and fiber, more milk, and more vegetables and fewer sweets, sweetened beverages, and snack foods than nonparticipants.⁷ All federally reimbursed school lunches must provide one-third of the Recommended Daily Allowances (RDAs) for calories, protein, and nutrients, such as calcium, iron, and vitamin A. In addition, they must meet the USDA *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* for fat and saturated fat.

On the other hand, many of the school meals are high in sodium and fat. One study found that 95 percent of NSLP participants exceeded the upper limit for recommended intake of sodium; and, only 25 percent of elementary schools and 10 percent of high schools served meals that met the standard for fat.⁸ The challenge is that most affordable, pre-packaged, ready-to-serve foods used by many school cafeterias are often high in fat and sodium.⁹

What Are the Key Challenges Faced by Schools?

In an environment where schools are increasingly asked to do more with less, schools face significant nutritional, operational, administrative, and financial challenges when it comes to operating a healthy, sustainable school lunch program. The three main challenges are these:

- **Challenge 1: Improving the Nutritional Quality of School Lunches.** The nutritional quality of the federally reimbursed NSLP is not as good as it could be, and schools are under pressure to improve the quality of the foods being offered.
- **Challenge 2: Increasing Enrollment Rates in the School Lunch Program.** NSLP enrollment rates for eligible students around the county are lower than what they could be. The greater the number of eligible children enrolled in the NSLP at a school, the more dollars are available to the school for program costs.
- **Challenge 3: Making the Most of Limited NSLP Funding.** NSLP funding is limited, and there is a real need for state strategies to help schools make the most of their available dollars. Through more efficient operations and increased purchasing power, schools can move toward achieving the biggest nutritional-bang possible for the buck.

Despite the fact that schools face significant nutritional, operational, administrative, and financial challenges in operating school meal programs, such programs offer unparalleled opportunity to improve the nutritional quality of foods served to our nation’s students—and ultimately improve their health. States can influence the diets of children at greatest risk for poor health by working with local schools to provide not just a reliable source of nourishment but the best nutrition possible for every dollar spent on the NSLP. The three main challenges encountered by schools in the NSLP and the steps states can take to address these challenges are discussed in more detail below.

Challenge 1: Improving the Nutritional Quality of School Lunches

Research indicates that the nutritional quality of NSLP meals is not as good as it could be. Currently, schools are under increasing pressure to improve the quality of the foods being offered. Efforts to improve the quality of the nutrition environment in schools started to gain momentum in 2004, when the Child Nutrition and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Reauthorization Act required all NSLP participating schools to develop and implement a school wellness policy. Yet recent reports find that the majority of district wellness policies fail to provide the healthy foods and physical activity as required by the mandate.^{10, 11}

Contributors to Nutritional Quality

Many factors affect the level of nutritional quality of school lunches in the NSLP. As previously mentioned, the unofficial shift in the NSLP's focus—from trying to provide the maximum number of calories per dollar spent to providing the best nutrition possible for every dollar—has schools reevaluating the nutritional content of their school lunch offerings.¹²

In trying to improve the nutritional content of the meals they serve to their students, schools are constrained by many factors, including the following:

- *What they can afford.* Schools can purchase only as much food as they have the budget for, and healthy, fresh, whole foods tend to cost more than the prepackaged foods commonly served in schools today.¹³
- *School cafeteria kitchen capacity.* Many schools rely on prepackaged, frozen foods that just need to be warmed or fried prior to serving.¹⁴ Such schools' may lack the refrigerator capacity to store fresh foods and other kitchen equipment for healthier food preparation, such as slicers, ovens, and steamers.
- *Food service personnel training.* Workers in school cafeterias often are not required to have knowledge of nutrition science, menu planning, or healthy cooking practices.¹⁵
- *What is available for purchase.* Foods available through state and local food distributors, the DOD's Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, and the USDA's free commodities program, influence school's purchasing and procurement practices.¹⁶ If the availability of nutritious options is limited, then schools will be limited in terms of what they can serve.

These factors have the potential to affect a school's ability to serve nutritious meals. Fortunately, there are several strategies that states can use to help schools be successful in these areas.

Strategies to Improve Nutritional Quality

In an effort to improve the nutritional quality of their school lunch programs, many states have employed a wide range of legislative, regulatory, and administrative options. As discussed below, some of the strategies that governors and states can take to improve the quality of their school lunch programs include:

- Strengthening nutrition standards at the state level for meals served as part of the NSLP;
- Increasing school food preparation and storage capacity by offering federal and state grants;
- Providing food service personnel with menu planning, food preparation, and presentation skills training to increase qualifications; and
- Facilitating connections between school cafeterias and the local agricultural community to procure locally sourced fruits and vegetables.

Ideally, these strategies would be employed in combination. It is important to recognize, though, that schools face challenges in implementing these strategies. Governors and agency staff can help schools overcome such challenges by providing technical assistance and sharing successful practices from around the state.

Strengthen Nutrition Standards at the State Level

In the wide range of regulatory options available to states, several chose to focus on improving nutrition standards for federally reimbursable school lunches. Currently, NSLP meals are required

to meet the USDA's *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* for the percent of calories from fat and saturated fat, as well as specific nutritional requirements for total calories, protein, and other key nutrients. However, in order to align school meals with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and improve the healthfulness of school meals, the Institute of Medicine currently recommends that the Food and Nutrition Service of the USDA adopt stricter nutrition standards, including:

- Increasing the amount of and variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains;
- Setting a minimum and maximum level of calories; and
- Increasing the focus on reducing the amounts of saturated fat and sodium provided.

To date, 18 states have nutrition standards that are stricter than the federal requirements. **California** state law prohibits schools from offering fried foods or foods that contain artificial trans-fats. State reimbursement funds for schools in California are tied to compliance with this law. Schools must submit a certification form to the state department of education each year to receive their state portion of school meal reimbursements.

The 2007 **Mississippi** Healthy Students Act, among other things, regulates food and beverage choices for students and requires that schools offer at least one fruit or vegetable option each day and that weekly menus offer a total of three different fruits and five different vegetables. The law in this state also requires schools to limit fried food whenever possible, use healthy food preparation techniques and USDA-sponsored training materials, and provide the department of education with training documentation and assessment records for school food personnel.

Increase School Food Preparation and Storage Capacity

Schools, especially those that serve at-risk populations, often have limited onsite capacity to store and prepare food. Many schools lack the financial resources necessary to repair, redesign, or purchase new equipment that would allow school cafeterias to prepare fresh foods and produce. As a critical approach to ensure healthy options are served to students, states can provide grants to schools and invest in small capital improvements such as refrigerators, ovens, steamers, salad bars, and food slicers.

The federal government started to address schools' lack of adequate school food preparation and storage capacity in the 2009 Recovery Act. This act allocated \$100 million for school food service equipment grants to schools that participate in the NSLP. States received the funds for these grants on the basis of their school meals administrative expense allocation.

Local school food authorities competitively applied for the grants from states. Preference was given to schools at which more than 50 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in the NSLP.¹⁷ Early indications are that most states encouraged schools to use the funds to replace deep fat fryers and purchase things like convection ovens and refrigeration space to store fresh fruits and vegetables. Some states like **Wisconsin** added their own unique guidelines and encouraged schools to use funds for equipment that will influence the farm-to-school program in their state.

In **Mississippi**, the state Office of Healthy Schools partnered with a local foundation to provide capital improvement grants directly to schools. Thus, for example, one school had access to whole produce through the federally subsidized DOD Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program; however, students were not consuming the produce whole and, instead, used the fruits and vegetables to disrupt class or just threw them away. Research shows that cut fruit and vegetables

are more likely to be eaten. After receiving a \$1,200 grant from a local foundation to purchase a slicer and sectionizer, the school successfully reintroduced fresh fruit onto the school menu.

Provide Training for Food Service Personnel

Schools with the resources to procure whole, fresh foods may still struggle to incorporate the foods into the menu because of the food service personnel limited knowledge and limitations in their facilities.^{18,19} States can offer grants to schools that provide staff with nutrition training or enhance their food preparation skills. An investment in building staff capacity is a critical element of any effort to augment the nutritional quality of school meals.

At the federal level, the USDA’s Team Nutrition initiative provides funding to schools for nutrition education. The overall goal is to promote the nutritional health of our nation’s students. Emphasis is placed on working through state agencies to recruit Team Nutrition schools. The training grant portion of the program provides nutrition and food service personnel with technical assistance for improved food preparation and presentation skills. Since 1995, the program has invested more than \$55 million to state agencies and schools, averaging roughly \$3.6 million a year in funding.²⁰

Facilitate Connections Between Schools and Local Agricultural Community

Food used in the school lunch program often is purchased through procurement contracts with distributors. Changes enacted by the 2008 Farm Bill now make it possible for NSLP-participating schools to specify a “geographical preference” for locally produced goods when procuring unprocessed agricultural products, such as fruit, eggs, milk, and meat.

Locally sourced contracts increase the availability of fresh fruit, vegetables, and meat for school meal programs and simultaneously decrease transportation energy costs and sustain local agriculture. **North Carolina** used locally sourced contracts for the procurement of state-grown apples. A successful pilot program in the western part of the state led to statewide program expansion in 2004, with participation by nearly 70 school districts and more than 2,400 schools. **New York** pays schools an additional 20 cents for every NSLP meal served if it includes locally grown agricultural goods.

Other states have named farm-to-school coordinators within their departments of agriculture or education to facilitate coordination between agriculture and food programs and businesses within the state. **Connecticut** took this approach one step further—providing instructional materials for participants across the state, as well as up-to-date lists of schools, farmers, or wholesale distributors that have agreed to provide local goods to schools.

Challenge 2: Increasing Enrollment in the School Lunch Program

Even the healthiest of school meal offerings will have a limited impact if students are not participating in the NSLP. Additionally, federal and state reimbursement dollars, which are tied to the number of NSLP meals sold in schools, are best leveraged when scale is achieved. Maximizing student enrollment is one way to achieve scale, making the NSLP more economically viable for schools.

More than 31 million students participated in the NSLP in 2008. Half of those children received free lunches; 10 percent received reduced-price meals; and 40 percent paid full price.²¹ About 17 percent of the children who paid full price were eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch but did not apply to the program because they believed they were ineligible, concerned about the stigma

associated with the program, believed the food was poor quality, or for administrative reasons (never received an application or application was too difficult).²²

The lack of enrollment by children who are eligible results in lost meal reimbursement dollars for schools.²³ Federal reimbursements make up the majority of revenue for a school lunch program, and the greater the number of eligible children enrolled in a school's free or reduced price lunch program, the larger the amount of reimbursements the school receives. For that reason, schools need effective strategies to ensure that all students who qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch in the NSLP are enrolled in the program.

Contributors to Low Enrollment

Two of the most commonly cited reasons why eligible students do not enroll in NSLP are that their parents incorrectly believe they are not eligible for the program or they are concerned about the poverty stigma associated with receiving free meals.²⁴ Students who are eligible, but do not enroll in the NSLP, miss out on a reliable source of nourishment and key nutrients for healthy growth and development.²⁵

Competitive foods—that is, foods or beverages sold outside of the traditional school lunch program either through cafeteria à la carte lines, vending machines, school stores, snack bars, or school fundraisers—also are associated with decreased student participation in the NSLP.^{26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32} Increasingly, schools have turned to the sale of competitive foods to partially cover NSLP expenditures and offset the rise in food costs that often is associated with healthier menus.

Competitive foods represent a difficult tradeoff for many schools. They are a known source of unhealthy food in schools, and they directly compete with student participation in the NSLP.³³ Yet the dollars generated from the sale of competitive foods can be an important source of discretionary funds for schools. It is important to note, however, that while schools may use competitive foods sales to partially offset budget shortfalls, research shows that competitive foods may ultimately lead to an overall revenue loss through decreased participation in the NSLP and fewer reimbursement dollars available to schools.³⁴

Strategies to Increase Enrollment

While low rates of enrollment in the NSLP continue to trouble many schools across the country, some states and communities have successfully employed various to increase enrollment rates. As discussed below, those strategies include the following:

- Simplify student enrollment in the NSLP through direct certification and state grants to schools for NSLP promotion campaigns;
- Reduce stigma through electronic payment systems; and
- Make competitive foods less competitive.

Simplify Student Enrollment in the NSLP

One strategy for increasing enrollment in the NSLP and determining students' eligibility is direct certification. Direct certification is the automatic NSLP enrollment of children who are deemed eligible through their family's participation in certain state or federal benefits, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This certification system eliminates the need for paper applications to determine student eligibility.³⁵

The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 required schools to make direct certification an automatic step in the NSLP certification process. Several states have implemented successful direct certification systems. A report from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service highlights effective methods identified by these states:³⁶

- Use a computerized data matching system to directly enroll children living in SNAP households. This alleviates the need for families to take the additional step of filling out NSLP-specific forms to enroll in the program.
- Build a system that regularly cross-references SNAP household data and allows for year-round direct enrollment, instead of once yearly. This captures children who become eligible at any point during the school year or switch school districts mid-year.
- Allow for variation in names and spellings when cross-referencing SNAP and school databases. This prevents eligible children from being denied direct certification just because the same name is recorded differently in one database compared with the other.
- Offer technical assistance for local school districts. Especially for smaller schools, assistance with direct certification implementation can increase effectiveness and improve relationships between states and schools.

A second strategy for increasing student enrollment in the NSLP is for states to provide direct grants to schools for educational and promotional marketing campaigns to raise awareness of NSLP, drive student participation, and decrease confusion around eligibility requirements.

The **New York** City Department of Education collaborated with public- and private-sector experts to redesign the school food program, revitalize menu offerings, enhance the lunch room environment, and create a business culture for the food service program. Savvy marketing at point-of-choice locations and local flexibility for kitchen managers to offer traditional, culturally relevant foods helped boost NSLP enrollment rates for the city to an all time high. With increased revenue generated by higher enrollment rates, the program hired a professional chef, improved kitchen facilities, provided training for kitchen managers, and nearly eliminated previous program deficits.

Reduce Stigma Through Electronic Payment Systems

In addition to increasing enrollment rates through the effective identification of eligible students, schools and states can address concerns about stigma attached to getting free or reduced-price lunches. Research shows that investing in electronic payment technology and providing debit cards for students to use at cafeteria checkout helps reduce stigma by removing the distinction between full-paying students and those that are nonpaying or reduced-price NSLP participants.³⁷

In **Iowa**, the *PaySchool* online payment system allows schools to receive electronic payments from parents and automatically pay for meals for eligible children, making the distinction invisible to students. Parents can control the meal plan and limit foods—such as fried foods, certain processed foods, and desserts—either entirely or restrict the number of portions each week.

Make Competitive Foods Less Competitive

Children have a natural preference for sweet foods and would likely choose unhealthy options if given the choice.³⁸ Competitive foods represent the kind of snacks that kids prefer (chips, candy,

French fries, ice cream, sugar-sweetened beverages, etc.) and are known to decrease student participation in the NSLP.

In an effort to decrease the effect of competitive foods on students' participation in the NSLP, states can establish healthier nutrition standards for competitive foods, thereby making them less appealing to students. This strategy, beyond increasing participation in the NSLP, has the added benefit of improving the overall nutritional quality of the school food environment.³⁹

Currently, 27 states have nutrition standards for competitive foods. **Pennsylvania** developed a comprehensive set of statewide nutrition standards for competitive foods sold in schools. In 2007, the state legislatively changed its school code to allow for bonus lunch and breakfast meal reimbursements to schools that adopt these standards as part of their school wellness policy.

Rhode Island and **Connecticut** passed laws for competitive foods that limit fat, saturated fat, trans-fat, sodium, and added sugars and moderate portion sizes. Additionally, these standards include categories of allowable beverages that do not contain added sugars or artificial sweeteners. The state also provides lists of law-compliant foods and beverages and approved vendors, manufacturers, brokers, and distributors from whom schools can purchase acceptable products.

Challenge 3: Making the Most of NSLP Funding

Even with 100 percent enrollment of eligible students in the NSLP and increased participation, the budget dollars available to schools are limited. There is a real need for state strategies to help schools improve operational efficiency and increase purchasing power. Schools must find realistic ways to address financial challenges, make the most of their available NSLP dollars, and achieve the best nutritional-bang possible for the buck.

Contributors to Limited Funding

Schools are expected to operate the federally reimbursable school lunch program on a not-for-profit basis. Tough economic times, rising energy costs, and increased pressure to provide fresh, healthy foods all affect program costs, making it harder for schools to cover budget shortfalls.

Federal, state, and local meal reimbursement dollars cover only 82 percent of program costs and schools or states are left to make up the difference.⁴⁰ The federal government covers the majority of cost associated with operating the NSLP—schools receive varying amounts of reimbursement for every free, reduced-price and full-priced meal served. In addition, states and localities provide some additional revenue for schools (on average 2 percent and 6 percent of total revenue respectively).⁴¹

Strategies to Address Limited Funding

Although NSLP funds are limited, there are a couple strategies that states can implement to support local efforts to maximize available funds without having to compromise efforts on the nutritional front:

- Outsource operational responsibility for the lunch program to a school food service management company; and
- Create statewide or regional “cooperative agreements” for food procurement.

Outsource to Food Service Management Companies

Some schools find it financially beneficial to hire a food service management company to run the meals program instead of running it themselves. School food service management companies are private entities that enter into contract with local school food authorities to manage some or all aspects of a school meals program. Because these companies often serve multiple school districts at a time, they benefit from economies of scale and increased purchasing power.

Rhode Island issued a statewide, model contract for food service management company engagement and a list of approved companies. Interested schools can opt to contract with a state-sanctioned food service management company to manage their meal programs, saving time on contract negotiations and receiving technical assistance on favorable contracting language. Local school districts are not required to hire these services and can continue to run their own meal programs or contract independently.

Create “Cooperative Agreements” for Food Procurement

The “cooperative agreement” procurement approach—where several school districts jointly negotiate contracts with local procurement vendors—saves schools money through economies of scale and increased purchasing power. This strategy allows schools to negotiate better prices during the procurement process and creates demand for certain products used in the school meal program, influencing what is available on the market.

A National Food Service Management Institute study found that school districts using the “cooperative agreement” approach paid the least for food items monitored by the study and reduced distributors’ costs because fewer contract bids were filled out and product demand was streamlined, resulting in fewer dollars spent on diversifying the product supply.⁴²

States are exploring cost saving measures using this strategy. The Northern **Illinois** Independent Purchasing Cooperative (NIIPC) includes 11 charter school districts and saves member schools an average of 9 percent to 35 percent off purchases through the program.

Moving Forward

As this Issue Brief demonstrates, there are several strategies and resources available to states for helping schools maximize their NSLP funds. The school lunch program offers a wealth of opportunities to improve the nutritional quality of foods served to our nation’s students—and ultimately improve their health—all while being sensitive to the financial challenges inherent in running a school meals program. Although school-related decisions tend to occur on the local level, governors and their staff have an arsenal of state-level strategies available to support local efforts.

There is no one silver bullet solution for addressing the challenges associated with the NSLP, and each strategy available involves tradeoffs. Clearly, however, the federal government’s interest in improving the school food system and the recent financial investment offered through the 2009 Recovery Act signify that momentum is building around the issue. States and schools alike can work together to prioritize their challenges and select the appropriate set of solutions that is right for each community.

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Notes

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