

National Association of State Boards of Education

➔ State Strategies for Summer Nutrition

By Clarissa Hayes and Erima Fobbs

Over the summer, millions of low-income children lose access to the meals they relied on during the school day. The federally funded Summer Nutrition Programs are designed to replace school breakfast and lunch, serving meals at locations that often offer summertime educational, enrichment, and physical and recreational activities in low-income areas. Yet these programs serve only one in six of the low-income children who participate in the school lunch program during the school year.

Children with limited or uncertain access to meals experience more health-related, behavioral, and academic challenges than food-secure children at each educational level. They are more likely to suffer from stomachaches, headaches, colds, impaired memory, and diminished social performance, and they tend to have lower reading, arithmetic, and general test scores and to repeat a grade than food-secure children in the same age group.¹

Opportunities for year-round nutrition counter the negative effects of food insecurity and support student achievement. These programs ensure that children have adequate access to nutrition year-round, and they also keep children safe and supervised when school is out and their parents are working. In addition, the educational enrichment and recreational activities provided by summer meal sites help children continue to learn when school is not in session.

Federal programs include the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the Seamless Summer Option provided through the

National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Schools, local government agencies (such as parks and recreation), and private nonprofit organizations (such as Boys & Girls Clubs and YMCAs) provide meals through SFSP at sites that are in low-income areas or that primarily serve low-income children. These sites include schools, summer programs, parks, recreation centers, swimming pools, churches, or other locations where children congregate during the summer. Schools can instead provide meals at school and community-based sites through NSLP, but, while requiring less administrative work, NSLP provides schools a lower reimbursement rate for the meals than SFSP.

The Summer Nutrition Programs have grown over the last few years and in 2015 served 3.2 million children. The increase in participation is due to national, state, and local leadership to expand the programs, as well as some policy improvements that make more communities eligible to participate, ease administrative requirements, and require schools to conduct outreach.

Given that more than 80 percent of children who qualify still do not participate, every state can increase participation. State boards of education can be instrumental in expanding the implementation of the programs.

ROLE OF STATE BOARDS

State boards of education can do two things to increase the reach of the Summer Nutrition Programs: They can support adoption of state mandates for school participation, and they can partner with other state organizations to engage in community outreach.

Mandates. State legislatures can mandate that eligible school districts operate the Summer Nutrition Programs in low-income

areas. Schools are accessible, familiar, and a source for child nutrition that parents and communities already trust.

Mandates that require schools' participation have been passed in 10 states. Three of those—Florida, Missouri, and Texas—passed legislation that ensures children have access to meals at schools throughout the summer regardless of whether the schools offer summer school or other summer programs. The other seven states—California, Illinois, Ohio, Maine, Maryland, Washington, and Vermont—require eligible schools to provide summer meals if they open their doors for summer school or other programs.

State boards can work with stakeholders and the legislation's sponsors to tailor mandates to state needs. The most effective mandates reach eligible communities by using the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunches during the school year—typically, 50 percent—as the criteria for requiring school districts to serve summer meals.

A strong mandate will bring all eligible schools into the program, as well as require programs serving summer meals to remain open for a designated minimum number of days. Texas, for example, requires 30 days of consecutive service. To gain support for legislation, states can calculate the amount of federal funding that would come into the state if a mandate were implemented.

State boards can support proposed legislation that enhances the participation and reach of summer meals programs in their states or strengthen existing mandates. For example, it may be helpful to limit school districts' ability to opt out with waiver requests, as Missouri's legislation allows. When waivers are allowed, it is helpful to require schools to hold public hearings before their waiver requests will be considered. Public hearings give the community a chance to talk publicly about the issue of hunger and encourage their district to participate in summer meals programs.

Outreach. The 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act modestly improved the Summer Nutrition Programs, requiring schools to conduct outreach to families and reducing paperwork for sponsors. States that establish aggressive, clear goals for expansion and outreach—and regularly convene public and private partners to ensure that goals are met—have seen an increase in participation.

The Illinois State Board of Education, for example, partners with state and local anti-hunger organizations to provide information sessions and outreach to nonprofits to encourage them to sponsor summer nutrition programs. It also streamlines requirements for school districts that already offer school meals programs to continue access to nutrition through the summer.

Many states have conducted comprehensive marketing campaigns, with a strong focus on schools. With input from community partners and school districts, anti-hunger organization Florida Impact and the state education agency rebranded the Summer Nutrition Program as a “Summer Break Spot,” which unified promotion and reduced stigma. Every year, children at schools in eligible communities take home flyers that direct families seeking nearby programs to a website and a hotline.

State boards can collaborate with community advocates, food banks, and other government agencies to identify underserved areas, set goals, and monitor implementation and growth. Additionally, as a statewide leader, state boards can encourage high standards for the Summer Nutrition programs and recognize and celebrate innovative, successful efforts led by schools and other champions.

In West Virginia, the state board of education recognized Senator John Unger at its monthly board meeting for his efforts to expand access to summer nutrition. The meeting was also an opportunity to educate board members on the opportunities and challenges around child nutrition.

CHILD NUTRITION ON THE HILL
Congress is considering legislation that may

affect the Summer Nutrition Programs. The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, the most recent iteration of the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act (CNR), expired in October 2015.

The majority of federal child nutrition programs are permanently authorized and all continue to operate. Yet there are several proposals that would remove obstacles to participation in summer meals programs:

- **streamlining of paperwork** to allow community-based organizations and local agency sponsors to feed children year-round with less administrative burden.
- **provision of a summer electronic benefit transfer card** to families whose children qualify for free and reduced-price school meals during the regular school year to purchase food at approved retailers. This would provide additional nutritional support to low-income families, especially in rural or other areas underserved by the Summer Nutrition Programs. The US Department of Agriculture tested this approach as part of its Summer Demonstration Projects, and the evaluations found that it had a dramatic impact in reducing childhood food insecurity.
- **additional investments.** The Summer Meals Act of 2015 (S. 613/H.R.1728) would allow sites to serve three meals (the current limit is two); lower the eligibility threshold from 50 percent to 40, thereby making it consistent with federal education funding for summer programs; and provide funding for transportation grants in addition to streamlining the programs for nonschool sponsors. Other legislation would allow some sponsors the flexibility to provide meals in other ways than at central sites where children must congregate to eat them.

Regardless of how the reauthorization fares in Congress, state boards can lend their authority toward expanded participation and promotion of school-run summer meal programs, as well as support statewide expansion. State boards should consider aligning and adopting policies that include the Summer Nutrition Programs and build strong partnerships among stakeholders to ensure that schools are taking advantage of all available resources to alleviate food insecurity during the summer.

Erima Fobbs, MPH, CPH, is NASBE's school health consultant, and Clarissa Hayes is a child nutrition policy analyst with the Food Research & Action Center, a lead advocacy organization working to end hunger in America through stronger public policies. For more information, visit www.frac.org.

NOTE

1. Meredith Hickson et al., “Too Hungry to Learn: Food Insecurity and School Readiness,” Children’s HealthWatch Research Brief (Boston, MA: Children’s HealthWatch, September 3, 2013); Meredith Hickson et al., “Feeding Our Human Capital: Food Insecurity and Tomorrow’s Workforce,” Children’s HealthWatch Research Brief, (Boston, MA: Children’s HealthWatch, September 3, 2013); “The Importance of Early Childhood Nutrition, WIC, and CACFP,” *Food Insecurity and Hunger in the U.S.: New Research* no. 7 (Boston, MA, and Washington, DC: Children’s HealthWatch and the Food Research and Action Center, August 2015); “Food Security, Health, and Well-Being,” *Food Insecurity and Hunger in the U.S.: New Research* no. 2 (Boston, MA, and Washington, DC: Children’s HealthWatch and the Food Research and Action Center, April 2014).

