Policy Brief: School Nutrition Programs

This analysis focuses on national standards for school nutrition in an effort to define the idea of a healthy school nutrition environment. It also outlines national standards for school nutrition as they are implemented in South Carolina. Given that each state has leeway in how they implement food programs, so long as they conform to minimum requirements set by the federal government, the question of what constitutes a healthy nutritional environment is worth further examination.

LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK OF SCHOOL NUTRITION

The National School Lunch Act of 1946

The National School Lunch Act was created in 1946 and signed into law by President Harry Truman. The program was born out of the realization that local schools and school districts lack the resources to make a school lunch program sustainable.¹ Prior to the legislation’s passage, only select states had school lunch programs, and not all school districts within the state had such programs. Further, the programs that were in place functioned on a year-to-year basis (using agricultural surpluses), which left children open to sporadic hunger and unbalanced diets.² The Act went further to identify the health and well-being of children as a “national security interest.”³ Distributions of funds for the program were based on two criteria: (1) the number of school children between ages 5 and 17, and (2) state per capita income, with states with below average per capita income receiving more federal funds than others.⁴ States also had to adhere to minimum guidelines set forth by the legislation: meals had to meet specific nutritional standards set by the USDA Secretary; schools had to provide free- or reduced-price lunches for those students meeting a means-test; school lunch programs had to remain non-profit and use resources in abundance or those given to them by the USDA (when possible); and schools had to maintain receipts and submit reports on a regular basis. The Act was amended in 1952 to provide noncontiguous states and territories with minimum equivalent funding comparable to the lowest per capita state in the contiguous U.S., and again in 1962 on the basis of allocation of resources. In this case, states with the same number of school children and per capita income were receiving equal amounts of funding, even if the means-tested need in one state exceeded that of a state receiving the same amount of funds. To remedy this issue, the allocation formula was altered to reflected “frequency of participation in the program” and “need rate of the state.”⁵

² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
The Child Nutrition Act of 1966

The Child Nutrition Act of 1966 (CNA) was designed to work in conjunction with the National School Lunch Act to make it easier for schools to purchase agricultural goods and increase the efficiency of providing a well-balanced meal for students. Specifically, it created a two-year pilot project School Breakfast Program and established a food service equipment assistance program, in addition to increasing funding for meals served to needy students. Various programs were established in the wake of this act. While many were pilots that were discontinued, others are still active today, including the Child and Adult Care Food Program, Summer Food Service Program, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Furthermore, the inclusion of the CNA centralized school nutrition under the United States Department of Agriculture. The Act was amended in 1968 to allow for substitutions for individual dietary needs, regardless of whether they detracted from the minimum nutritional standards. The CNA is reauthorized every four to five years, along with other federal child nutrition bills, and is open for revision or amendment during reauthorization.

SCHOOL NUTRITION IN SOUTH CAROLINA

South Carolina adheres to the requirements set forth in the National School Lunch Act. All meals served by public schools currently meet the criteria set forth in the legislation. However, the state has made efforts to tailor the Act’s requirements to the needs of South Carolinians.

State Identified Needs for School Lunch

States have little to say in the composition of the macronutrient makeup of the meals they serve; those standards are set in the National School Lunch Act. However, states are given the ability to make any food that meets those nutritional requirements. In a 2004 report, the South Carolina Department of Education identified a new goal for school meals: to make them “attractive to students by appealing to their taste preferences and cultural needs.” The report also noted that “school meals should be priced no lower than the cost of providing them so that school food programs are self-supporting.”

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8 Gunderson, “National School Lunch Program.”
9 These requirements vary with grade level, as nutritional requirements by age differ.
11 Ibid.
The likely reason for the first goal is that if appropriations for states are based on frequency of meal purposes, then there is an incentive to get as many students as possible to purchase lunches at school. Making the meals more attractive to students may encourage them to choose a school lunch over bringing a lunch from home. The second objective technically falls in line with the National School Lunch Act, but the stated goal sets no upper limit on the cost of lunches to students. It is not hard to imagine a situation in which a school attempts to charge more than the cost of the lunch (which would technically violate the nonprofit requirement of the National School Lunch Act) and redistribute the “profits” elsewhere in the school budget to even out costs.

**Potential Improvements in South Carolina School Lunch Programs**

Given that other issues likely take precedence in the South Carolina state legislature, issues regarding school lunch programs may go unaddressed. However, the South Carolina branch of the School Nutrition Association (SNA), a national, nonprofit professional organization, has been quite vocal in the state’s school food programs. Primary among their concerns is the Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act of 2009, which was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives to amend the Child Nutrition Act, but died in committee and has not been reintroduced since. The 2009 amendments retained the minimal nutritional standards, but encouraged states to provide more than the minimum. The South Carolina chapter of the SNA is concerned with a number of specific issues raised by the proposed 2009 amendments and left unaddressed by either the CNA or the National School Lunch Act. First, while school meals must still meet nutritional guidelines set forth by Congress and the Secretary of Agriculture, items in vending machines are not subject to these nutritional guidelines. Second, Congress has the power to authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to establish nutritional guidelines and prohibit the sale of “minimal nutritional value” foods. Third, federally reimbursed school meals and child nutrition and health are arguably undermined by the uneven authority of the Secretary of Agriculture to apply nutrition standards throughout the school campus and over the course of the full school day. These are issues that the SNA would like to see addressed by future amendments to child nutrition legislation.

**PRESCRIPTIONS FOR A HEALTHY SCHOOL NUTRITION ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTH CAROLINA**

To ensure that students are getting proper nutrition, all public schools in South Carolina participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which provides monetary assistance to schools for purchasing equipment, paying food service staff, and purchasing foods and supplies for meals. The NSLP also distributes food items to participating schools in the form of commodities. On a typical day, around 473,000 students are served lunch in South Carolina public schools. All of these meals must

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12 The idea of food items being prohibited based on “minimal nutritional value” arguably goes against the idea that items in vending machines should not be subject to nutritional standards. Items defined as “minimally nutritious” are those items devoid of any significant macronutrients. Most vending machine items are high in sugars or fats.

meet specific nutrient requirements and Dietary Guidelines outlined by the USDA. Furthermore, 52 schools in South Carolina have participated in a Farm to School pilot program which encourages development of healthy school cafeteria recipes; develops and distributes monthly nutrition and agriculture supplemental lessons for students K-12; and procures, delivers, and implements materials for 104 school gardens across the state.

South Carolina also implemented other programs to provide schools with health food and promote physical activity, including Healthier Day School, Healthier US School Challenge, and Team Nutrition. All of these programs seek to incorporate the basics for “what makes a healthy school nutritional environment,” as outlined by the USDA. We encourage the state of South Carolina to maintain and deepen their commitment to implementing USDA recommendations for creating a health school nutritional environment, including the following:

1. Continue and expand the Farm to School pilot program.
2. Provide adequate time and space for students to eat lunch.
3. Provide nutritional education at all grade levels.
4. Use non-food rewards for achievement.
5. Encourage healthy eating through campus marketing.
6. Make water accessible at all times.
7. Help teachers to model healthy eating and lifestyles.
8. Offer healthy food choices at extracurricular activities.
9. Seek input from the community.

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14 Ibid.