

State Strategies to Reduce Childhood Hunger

Executive Summary

Governors recognize the critical importance of ensuring that school-age children have regular access to healthy meals. Studies show that when children do not have sufficient access to food, they do not do as well in school and are more likely to suffer from health issues. Federal child nutrition programs are important resources that help states increase children's access to food and provide nutritionally balanced meals at low or no cost to eligible children. Governors can help reduce childhood hunger in their states by drawing attention to the issue and implementing policy and programmatic changes to increase children's participation in child nutrition programs. This paper summarizes actions governors can take in four key areas to reduce childhood hunger:

- Communicate and collaborate on the importance of reducing hunger;
- Expand access to school breakfast;
- Support innovation in summer meal programs; and
- Streamline eligibility determination for free meals.

Introduction

Governors recognize the critical importance of ensuring that school-age children have regular access to healthy meals. Studies show that when children do not have sufficient access to food, they do not do as well in school and are more likely to suffer from health issues. For example, food insecurity among children is associated with lower math and reading scores between kindergarten and third grade, a higher likelihood of repeating a grade, impaired development of interpersonal relations and self-control, behavioral problems, higher hospitalization rates and higher rates of chronic health conditions.¹ In 2014, 3.7 million households with children experienced food insecurity, accounting for 9.4 percent of all households with children.² Families that experience food insecurity

have limited or uncertain access to adequate food: They often run out of food before the end of the month, do not eat a nutritionally balanced meal, reduce the size of a meal or skip one or more meals in a day.³

Federal child nutrition programs are important resources to help states increase children's access to food because they support the provision of nutritionally balanced meals at low or no cost to eligible children. The programs include the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the Child and Adult Care Food Program at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).⁴ States administer child nutrition programs with financial reimbursement from the federal government. Participating schools and summer meal sites must serve meals and snacks that meet federal nutrition requirements. Schools participating in the SBP and NSLP must offer free or reduced-price lunches to eligible children in addition to serving full-price meals to other students. Children are eligible for free meals if their family income is at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL), and children are eligible for reduced-price meals if their family income is between 130 and 185 percent of FPL.⁵ Schools and summer meal sites receive cash reimbursements from USDA for each meal served. The amount of the per-meal reimbursement depends on the type of meal (breakfast, lunch, snack or afterschool meal) and whether it is a free, reduced-price or full-price meal.

Child nutrition programs are designed to provide healthy meals to children who may not otherwise have regular access to food, but participation in the programs varies considerably, even though eligibility requirements for the programs are the same. For example, 22 million children in 2015 ate a free or reduced-price lunch each school

day.⁶ In comparison, nearly 12 million children ate free or reduced-price breakfast in 2015, accounting for only 54 percent of the children who received free or reduced-price lunch each day.⁷ Participation in the summer meal program is even lower: At peak participation, 2.6 million children ate free summer meals in July 2015, accounting for only 11.6 percent of the children who received free or reduced-price lunch each day during the school year.⁸ The data suggest that government can do more to increase access to and participation in child nutrition programs.

Communicate and Collaborate on the Importance of Reducing Hunger

The most important roles governors can play to reduce childhood hunger are to make it a priority for the state and use their bully pulpit to communicate the importance of the issue to top leaders and other stakeholders. The governor's support and involvement can result in policy changes and other actions that increase participation in child nutrition programs. Governors and state agency leaders can also convene stakeholders and launch public-private partnerships to create a collaborative approach to increasing children's access to meals across the state.

Several governors have established statewide councils or working groups to address childhood hunger, with those groups charged with recommending policy and programmatic actions to the governor. For example, **Nevada** Governor Brian Sandoval created the Governor's Council on Food Security in 2014 to improve food security in the state.⁹ Based on a recommendation from the council, Governor Sandoval submitted a bill to the state legislature, which it passed, creating Nevada's Breakfast After the Bell program. In **Maryland**, reducing childhood hunger is one of the four strategic goals of the Children's Cabinet, supported by the Governor's Office for Children.¹⁰ **Virginia** Governor Terry McAuliffe created the Commonwealth Council on Bridging the Nutritional Divide in 2014. One of the council's three goals is to eliminate childhood hunger by increasing participation in nutrition assistance programs.¹¹ **Pennsylvania** Governor Tom Wolf created

the Governor's Food Security Partnership in 2015, which is responsible for promoting coordination and joint planning between government agencies and private-sector partners. The partnership established specific goals for reducing hunger by 2020 and issued a blueprint that outlines specific actions to achieve those goals.¹²

Another strategy governors can use is to issue a challenge to schools to increase participation in school breakfast or other child nutrition programs. In Nevada, Governor Sandoval challenged all schools in the state to increase participation in their school breakfast programs. Schools participating in the challenge were eligible to receive technical assistance and equipment to improve their breakfast programs. At the end of the challenge period, schools that had the largest increases in participation received prizes and recognition from the governor.¹³ **Colorado** Governor John Hickenlooper and former **New Hampshire** Governor Maggie Hassan issued similar school breakfast challenges to schools in their states.

Governors and their spouses can also publicly lend their support to child nutrition programs to promote increased participation in the programs throughout the state. In **Connecticut**, Governor Dannel Malloy made a commitment to promote the SBP to the state's school superintendents. He issued a letter to all school superintendents indicating his support for the program and followed up with them several times to ensure that they knew the program was a priority for him.¹⁴ **Montana** Governor Steve Bullock and First Lady Lisa Bullock launched a campaign to promote the importance of school breakfast, with the aim of encouraging more schools to offer the program or switch to alternative breakfast delivery models.¹⁵ In June 2015, Virginia First Lady Dorothy McAuliffe held a School Breakfast Summit with school leaders and other stakeholders to recruit more schools, especially those with high poverty rates, to participate in the SBP.¹⁶ Mrs. McAuliffe also issued a letter to school superintendents indicating her support for the summer meal program. Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson visited a Breakfast in the

Classroom school last year and proclaimed March 2016 as School Breakfast Month to highlight the positive impact school breakfast can have on child health and student achievement.¹⁷

Although governors and state agency leaders can take many actions to increase children's access to meals, many states recognize that the magnitude of the challenge requires a collaborative solution. Public-private partnerships can provide an infrastructure for implementing a governor's agenda to reduce childhood hunger. The traditional role for state agencies in operating child nutrition programs is that of monitoring and compliance, but a multisector partnership brings stakeholders to the table who can play a key role in implementing the governor's initiative.

For example, many states and communities have launched collaborations with Share Our Strength to combat childhood hunger at the state and local level. Share Our Strength has No Kid Hungry campaigns in 15 states: **Arkansas, California, Illinois, Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Montana, New York, Nevada, North Carolina, Texas, Washington, Wisconsin** and **Virginia**.¹⁸ No Kid Hungry campaigns in states and communities build a public-private partnership that brings together many stakeholders with the same goal: ending childhood hunger in their state. For example, in Maryland, a public-private partnership leads the state's efforts to increase participation in child nutrition programs. The Partnership to End Childhood Hunger in Maryland is a coalition of public and private entities, including the Governor's Office for Children; the departments of human resources, education and health and mental hygiene; Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry campaign; Maryland Hunger Solutions; corporate supporters; and a number of other state and local nonprofit organizations (NPOs).¹⁹

Other valuable members of states' collaborative partnerships to reduce childhood hunger include food banks, universities and state or regional dairy associations. For example, a key member of Arkansas's

childhood hunger collaborative is the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, representing a network of six Feeding America food banks that built a coordinated food purchasing and distribution system in the state. The network distributes food directly to agencies and programs that then feed people in need throughout the state.²⁰ In **Alabama**, Auburn University's Hunger Solutions Institute (HSI) plays a leadership role in coordinating the state's effort to reduce childhood hunger. HSI launched the End Childhood Hunger in Alabama campaign, which HSI leads with Lieutenant Governor Kay Ivey and Auburn University's dean of the College of Human Sciences. When **New Jersey** was expanding access to school breakfast, the Mid-Atlantic Dairy Association offered grants to schools to purchase equipment so that they could serve breakfast and provided additional resources to help schools implement a Breakfast After the Bell program.²¹

Expand Access to School Breakfast

Research shows that breakfast is an important meal for school-age children: Eating breakfast is associated with improved academic performance, improved behavior and attentiveness, and fewer visits to the school nurse.²² Not all children who need school breakfast have access to it, however; only 54 percent of children who receive free or reduced-price lunch each day also receive breakfast at school. Although some of those children may be eating breakfast at home, it is likely that families that have limited income and struggle to provide lunches for their children also struggle to provide breakfasts.

Governors and state agencies can use two strategies to increase access to breakfast for food-insecure children: increase the number of children in a school who participate in the program, and increase the number of schools that offer SBP. States are implementing alternative breakfast delivery models, such as Breakfast After the Bell, to make it easier for students to access breakfast each day, increasing the number of children and often the number of schools participating in the program. Another strategy to expand access to school breakfast is the Community

Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows high-poverty schools to provide breakfast to all enrolled students at no cost, eliminating the need for individual applications. The CEP program was created by The Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act, which the U.S. Congress passed in 2010.²³ Following positive results from the initial rollout in 11 states, the program was expanded nationwide in 2014.

To increase the number of food-insecure children who receive breakfast at school, many schools are implementing alternative breakfast service models, including Breakfast After the Bell. Under a traditional model, breakfast is served in the cafeteria before the school day begins, yet research suggests that the timing and location of breakfast service are important factors in program participation.²⁴ Many students cannot arrive at school early enough to eat breakfast before classes begin because of bus schedules or other transportation issues. In addition, the school cafeteria may not be in a convenient location for students to access breakfast before school begins. Research indicates that offering breakfast in the classroom as part of the school day is linked to higher rates of participation in the program.²⁵

SBP offers flexibility in how schools serve breakfast, both in terms of where (physically) meals are served and to whom. Schools are using a variety of alternative delivery models to make breakfast available to more students at school, including students eligible for free and reduced-price meals as well as those who pay full price. Breakfast can be served in the classroom during the first 10 to 15 minutes of the school day as teachers take attendance, collect homework or make announcements. With pressure on teachers and principals to maximize their instructional hours, governors can reassure school districts that breakfast in the classroom is considered instructional time per federal guidance. Another model is grab-and-go breakfast, in which breakfasts are individually packaged and served from mobile service carts in high-traffic areas, and then consumed in the classroom or elsewhere; breakfasts can be served first thing in the morning, between classes or at a morning break. Some schools serve packaged breakfasts to students on the bus ride

to school. A benefit of an alternative breakfast delivery model is that breakfast can be served to many more students, offering the nutritional benefits of breakfast to students of all income levels.²⁶

To increase schools' use of alternative breakfast delivery models, several states offer financial incentives to schools that use those models, with funding coming from state budget appropriations. The Maryland Meals for Achievement program provides funding to schools that offer breakfast in the classroom to all students. Schools in which more than 40 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch can apply for the program.²⁷ Maryland was one of the top states for growth in school breakfast participation among free and reduced-priced lunch-eligible students in the 2014–2015 school year.²⁸ Participation grew 4.8 percent from the 2014–2015 to the 2015–2016 school years.²⁹ Virginia offers an additional 5 cent reimbursement per meal for schools that use alternative breakfast delivery, an incentive that helped increase breakfast participation by nearly 4 percent in 2015 compared to 2014.^{30,31} Arkansas launched the Arkansas Meals for Achievement pilot program in 2013 that provided grants to schools so that they can serve breakfast at no charge to all students by using alternative breakfast delivery models.³² The program helped participating schools increase their breakfast participation by an average of 80 percent and paved the way for Arkansas school districts to begin adopting the USDA Community Eligibility Provision during the 2014–2015 school year, which allows eligible districts to serve free breakfast and lunch to all students.

To increase the number of schools participating in breakfast programs, several states have passed laws implementing Breakfast After the Bell programs, which require high-poverty schools to serve breakfast to all students at no cost after the school day begins using alternative meal delivery models. Schools are designated “high poverty” based on the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. For example, **New Mexico** requires schools in which more than 85 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price

lunch to participate in Breakfast After the Bell.³³ New Mexico now has the second-highest ratio of free and reduced-price lunch-eligible students participating in school breakfast, at 70.6 per 100 free and reduced-price lunch-eligible students.³⁴

In Colorado, additional schools became eligible for Breakfast After the Bell when the high poverty threshold dropped from 80 percent in the 2014–2015 school year to 70 percent in the 2015–2016 school year.³⁵ Colorado experienced a 9.5 percent increase in school breakfast participation during the first year of the 70 percent high-poverty threshold.³⁶ Nevada requires school breakfast participation by schools in which more than 70 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.³⁷ The Nevada department of agriculture also offers grants totaling \$2 million to help schools implement the program, covering expenses such as equipment, supplies, educational materials and staff time.³⁸ Three months into the 2015–2016 school year, Nevada had doubled the number of schools participating in school breakfast.³⁹

West Virginia's school breakfast program requires all schools in the state—not just schools with high poverty rates—to offer breakfast to all students. Schools are required to adopt a breakfast delivery model that allows all children to eat breakfast. Approved breakfast strategies include grab and go, breakfast in the classroom, and breakfast after first period.⁴⁰ West Virginia's requirements have helped the state reach the nation's highest ratio of free and reduced-price lunch-eligible students participating in school breakfast, at 82.3 per 100 free and reduced-price lunch-eligible students.⁴¹ Participation in school breakfast in West Virginia grew by 35 percent from 2012 to 2015.⁴²

Support Innovation in Summer Meal Programs

Summer is a particularly challenging time for low-income children who rely on school meals during the school year. The SFSP provides meals and snacks to low-income children during the summer months when

school is not in session. SFSP sites are in low-income areas where at least half the children's families have incomes at or below 185 percent of FPL, meaning that the children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.⁴³ Meals are served at no cost to all children at the sites. SFSP regulations require children to eat their meals onsite: They cannot pick up their meals from the site and take them home to eat.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, participation in the summer meals program is low. Only 12.7 percent of students who receive free or reduced-price lunch during the school year also receive free meals during the summer. States have taken a variety of innovative approaches to increase participation in the summer meal program, including making it easy for families to search for nearby summer meal sites, establishing a mobile meals program to bring meals to children and collaborating with community partners to establish summer meal sites in nontraditional locations.

One barrier to summer meal program participation is limited awareness in the community of meal sites. To increase program participation, Michigan created a summer meal program site locator online, where families can search for their nearest meal site, and then get driving directions, meal types and site times.⁴⁵ Families can also identify nearby meal sites by calling the state's 2-1-1 system or by texting a dedicated campaign number.⁴⁶ Similarly, Connecticut allows families to search for information about nearby summer meal sites online and by text message.⁴⁷ Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry campaign provides a nationally automated texting service that pulls information from USDA's National Hunger Hotline to help families find local summer meal sites. No Kid Hungry partners with National Hunger Hotline to access the data state agencies regularly send to the national office about the name, location and hours of operations of open sites in their state.

Transportation can also be a barrier to children participating in summer meal programs. Some children are not able to come to a central location to eat a meal because they do not have transportation

or there are safety concerns about children walking to sites. Arkansas launched several mobile meal efforts to bring summer meals to children in their communities. Through one program, SFSP sites could apply to receive an in-kind grant for a summer meals bus plus \$3,000 in operating funds over two years. The retrofitted school bus was made available through the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, which is the lead partner for the No Kid Hungry campaign in Arkansas, a public-private partnership in cooperation with the state's departments of education and human services.⁴⁸ One effective mobile meals partnership, the Arkansas Dream Center, uses a fleet of vehicles to bring summer and after-school meals to children at more than 60 sites in central Arkansas.⁴⁹

Several states have collaborated with community partners to establish summer meal sites in innovative locations. North Carolina was struggling to find appropriate summer meal sites in its rural communities, especially those with the capacity to prepare meals. To address that challenge, the state began working with restaurants to prepare food for summer meal sites, using the restaurants' commercial kitchens. Prepared food is provided to children in one of three ways: The restaurant delivers meals to the summer meal sites; the sites pick up prepared meals from the restaurant; or the restaurant serves as the site, reserving a section of its space for children to eat their meals.⁵⁰ In summer 2016, North Carolina launched a separate program called Going the Distance with the goal of increasing participation in the state's summer meal program. Going the Distance was open to public and private entities, and participating organizations had to implement innovative strategies to serve more summer meals to children that led to a growth rate in meals served of at least 5 percent compared to summer 2015. Innovative strategies include mobile meal service, creative kid-approved recipes, partnering with other NPOs and marketing the program and meals. Thirteen local entities eventually participated in Going the Distance and collectively served more than 312,000 more meals in 2016 than in 2015—an increase of 51 percent.⁵¹

Vermont approached the challenge of low summer meal participation by identifying community locations to which children already go in the summer months. As a result, Vermont began partnering with libraries as summer meal sites, given that children often go to libraries for summer reading programs and other activities. Vermont also launched partnerships with senior centers, using their commercial-grade kitchens in response to a challenge similar to that North Carolina faced.⁵²

Streamline Eligibility Determination for Free Meals

Another strategy states can use to increase students' access to school meals is to take advantage of existing flexibility in federal child nutrition programs to streamline and simplify the process of determining students' eligibility for free or reduced-price meals. The traditional process of eligibility determination is for individual families to complete a paper form to apply for free or reduced-price meals that requires the family to provide documentation of income level. The completion and processing of those paper application forms can place a burden on families, schools and state agencies. States have two options for streamlining the eligibility-determination process without traditional paper applications: direct certification and the CEP.

Direct certification provides automatic eligibility for free school meals for children in certain categories without requiring their families to submit a paper application. Students can be directly certified as categorically eligible if they are migrant, homeless, in the foster care system or enrolled in Head Start.⁵³ In addition, students can be directly certified by matching administrative data from other programs.⁵⁴ Low-income families often participate in multiple cash assistance programs and have already documented their family income through those application processes. Through direct certification, students' names are matched against participation lists for other low-income cash assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Data matching takes place at the state or district level, depending on state and school district characteristics. When students have been directly certified through categorical eligibility or data matching, their families are notified in writing, and they are eligible to receive free meals in all the federal child nutrition programs.⁵⁵

As of the 2013–2014 school year, states are required to directly certify 95 percent of SNAP participant children.⁵⁶ States with successful direct certification programs typically use a centralized data-matching system in which a state agency matches administrative data from SNAP and other programs with student enrollment records and distributes match results to schools.⁵⁷ For example, in **Minnesota** and North Carolina, the department of education receives SNAP and TANF enrollment records from the department of human services, conducts the data matching, and then notifies districts to access matched results from the central system.⁵⁸ Minnesota and North Carolina’s data matching processes are automated. In Arkansas, the Arkansas Research Center (ARC) conducts the data matching between school enrollment records and SNAP participation lists and sends matched data to districts; ARC is a research entity established to link data for educational research.⁵⁹ In addition to a centralized data-matching system, frequent data matching is important because families move between schools throughout the school year and also cycle on and off SNAP and other programs that confer categorical eligibility. States are required to match data at least three times throughout the school year, but states with successful programs often match data more frequently.⁶⁰ For example, Minnesota and New Hampshire match data monthly, while North Carolina matches data daily. States can strengthen their direct certification programs by improving their data-matching processes and conducting more frequent data matches.

The second option for streamlined eligibility determination is through CEP, which allows schools in high-poverty areas to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students in the school, regardless of individual students’ eligibility status. CEP builds on the direct certification

process outlined earlier and eliminates individual family applications. A school can participate in CEP if 40 percent or more of its student population has been directly certified as eligible through data matching or categorical eligibility. Schools can participate in CEP on an individual basis, as part of a district or as part of a group of schools to meet the 40 percent threshold. Reimbursements to schools are calculated by multiplying the percentage of identified students by 1.6 to determine the percentage of meals reimbursed at the free rate. The remaining percentage of meals is reimbursed at the paid rate.⁶¹

CEP was phased in beginning in the 2011–2012 school year, with the program becoming available nationwide beginning July 1, 2014. To understand the effect of CEP on child nutrition program participation and administrative workload for schools, the USDA Food and Nutrition Service conducted an evaluation of CEP in schools that were early adopters in **Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, New York and West Virginia**. The evaluation found that schools that implemented CEP saw increased participation in child nutrition programs. The average increase in school lunch participation was 5 percent, and the average increase in school breakfast participation was 9 percent. Further, CEP reduced the overall rate of certification errors and generated time savings for school administrators, food service administrative staff and food service workers.⁶²

Governors and state agencies can provide support to help districts and schools adopt and implement CEP. West Virginia implemented CEP statewide in the 2012–2013 school year. The Office of Child Nutrition in the state’s department of education spearheaded the implementation, identifying one staff person to coordinate CEP outreach and support to schools throughout the state. Office of Child Nutrition staff met with superintendents and school principals early to provide information about CEP and secure support for the initiative. Staff also provided technical assistance to school business offices, helping them work through the financial implications of implementing CEP. West Virginia conducts weekly direct certification data matches and provides real-time

information about identified student rates to schools and districts.⁶³ In Montana, Governor Bullock supported implementation of CEP in 2014 because of its alignment with his priority to end childhood hunger in the state. Governor Bullock sent a letter to school leaders to convey the importance of the program and encourage schools to sign up for CEP. The Office of Public Instruction identified schools that were eligible based on the percentage of identified students, sent CEP enrollment forms to those schools and provided technical assistance to help them implement CEP.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Governors can play a critical role in reducing childhood hunger in their states. They can use their role as the state's chief executive to draw attention to the issue

of childhood hunger and convene partners to develop and implement cross-sector solutions. In addition, governors and state leaders can implement policy and programmatic changes to increase participation in child nutrition programs. States can implement alternative breakfast delivery models or Breakfast After the Bell programs to make breakfast available to more children in an efficient and cost-effective way. States can increase participation in summer meal programs by making information about nearby sites easily accessible to families, launching mobile meal programs to bring meals to children and establishing summer meal sites in nontraditional locations such as restaurants or libraries. Finally, states can streamline and simplify the process of determining eligibility for free or reduced-price meals by implementing direct certification or CEP.

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