

Food Research and Action Center

Issue Briefs for Child Nutrition Reauthorization | Number 2

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Highlights:

- The Afterschool Nutrition Programs provide crucial funding to serve nutritious food to children and support quality afterschool programs.
- As of October 2009, more than 1.7 million children received a nutritious snack or supper on a typical day at nearly 37,000 afterschool programs.
- Child Nutrition Reauthorization provides an opportunity to improve the eligibility rules and increase participation in Afterschool Snack and Meal Programs.

How to Increase Low-Income Children's Access to Nutritious Meals and Snacks After School

Introduction

The Afterschool Nutrition Programs provide nutritious snacks and (in some instances) meals to low-income children while they participate in afterschool programs. The programs can be based in schools, local public agencies like parks and recreation departments, or nonprofit organizations. The food helps keep hunger at bay, ensuring that children are engaged and focus throughout the length of the program. It also acts as a magnet drawing children into quality educational and enrichment activities that keep them learning, safe, and out of trouble during the time that their parents are working. The afterschool nutrition funding supports both low-income working families and the afterschool programs that serve them. Parents know that their children are safely engaged and are receiving meals and snacks that meet federal nutrition guidelines, which eases the pressure on their food budget. For the afterschool programs, the nutrition funding boosts their income and frees up core programmatic dollars that would have been used to purchase the food, enabling them to use those scarce dollars to improve program quality or serve additional children.

The Afterschool Nutrition Programs are relatively new. The 1998 Child Nutrition Reauthorization law (P.L. 105-336) created the Afterschool Snack Program to pay for food in afterschool programs in low-income areas (the area eligibility test). The Afterschool Meal Program was created through the 2000 Agriculture Risk Protection Act (P.L. 106-224). Originally, the meal program was only available in six states. In subsequent years, Congress added more states through the appropriation process, so that currently 13 states and the District of Columbia have it.

Since the creation of the Afterschool Nutrition Programs, participation has grown each year. As of October 2009, more than 1.7 million children received a nutritious snack or supper on a typical day at approximately 37,000 afterschool programs. Still, there is a lot of room for growth in participation. Child Nutrition Reauthorization provides an opportunity to ensure that children receive the nutrition they need to continue learning throughout the afternoon. Important legislative changes include:

- Expanding the Afterschool Meal Program nationwide so that low-income children in all states can receive a nutritious meal after school;
- Improving the area eligibility test so that more afterschool programs serving significant numbers of low-income children are able to participate; and
- Making it easier for community-based afterschool programs that also serve children during the summer to participate by expanding the so-called Year-Round Summer Food Pilot, in effect a paperwork reduction strategy.

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Benefits

The Afterschool Nutrition Programs provide important supports for children and the local afterschool programs in which they participate. Afterschool snacks and meals help make it possible for children to be active and engaged during afterschool enrichment programming that keeps them safe, supervised, and learning while their parents are at work. The afterschool nutrition programs are a crucial support for working families, especially when the primary caregivers work non-traditional schedules. In addition, the programs stimulate state economies with an influx of federal child nutrition funding, and create jobs in the afterschool and food service sectors.

The Afterschool Nutrition Programs Support Quality Afterschool Programs

The Afterschool Nutrition Programs support quality afterschool programs that keep children learning after school and keep them safe during the after school hours, when juvenile crime peaks. The food provided acts as a magnet, drawing children and teenagers into quality enrichment programs. Afterschool programs improve children's academic achievement and provide them with the skills they need to achieve. Evaluations of afterschool programs show that children who participate are less likely to be involved in crime, and have lower incidences of drug use, violence and pregnancy.

The Afterschool Nutrition Programs Support Working Families

Afterschool programs meet the child care needs of working parents, including many low-income parents who work especially long or non-traditional hours. The most recent data available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that in 2004 5.2 million parents (15.3 percent of fathers and 11.5 percent of mothers that are full-time wage or salaried workers) worked evenings, nights, a rotating or split shift schedule, or on an employer-determined irregular schedule. In addition, single mothers are more likely than married mothers to work nonstandard and longer hours. About one-fourth of single mothers worked nonstandard hours and more than one-third worked weekends. The Afterschool Meal Program helps to ensure that children eat nutritious food while their parents are working.

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About the Afterschool Nutrition Programs

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provide funding to serve **snacks** to children age 18 and younger at afterschool programs that meet the area eligibility test (at least half of the children in the local school must be qualified to receive free or reduced-price school meals). Schools, local government agencies and private nonprofit organizations (including community-based and faith-based organizations) can participate in CACFP. Schools may participate in the National School Lunch Program and use federal dollars under the same area eligibility rules to provide snacks.

The Child and Adult Care Food Program also provides funding to serve **meals** at afterschool programs. In 13 states—Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wisconsin—and the District of Columbia meals can be served instead of or in addition to a snack to children age 18 and younger. Afterschool meal programs in these states use the same area eligibility test as the snack program. In all other states, meals only can be served to children younger than 13, and each child is individually qualified based upon household income.

All of the Afterschool Nutrition Programs (except NSLP snacks) can be used to feed children at programs operating on weekends and during school holidays, in addition to after school.

The Afterschool Nutrition Programs Help Reduce Childhood Hunger

Afterschool providers who serve low-income children have long reported that the snack or meal they provide is crucial because it is the last nutritious food that some of the children will receive until they arrive at school the next day. Nationally, 16.7 million children live in households that are struggling against hunger and would benefit immensely from an afterschool meal and snack.

The Afterschool Nutrition Programs Help Counter Childhood Obesity

All of the meals and snacks must meet federal nutrition guidelines, often replacing unhealthy food with better options. This is especially important during the after school hours, when children otherwise are frequently left to make their own decisions about food and nutrition due to their parents' work schedule. An article in the American Journal of Public Health found that children's body mass index increased significantly if their mother worked a non-traditional schedule, and the risk of being overweight was dramatically associated with the mother's nonstandard work schedule.¹ Another study compared the food and nutrient intake of what the children ate when they participated in the Afterschool Meal Program to what they ate when they were not participating. It found that the afterschool meal program improves the diets of children who are at nutritional risk.²

Recommendations for Improvement

Program limitations and barriers to participation cause too many children to miss out on healthy afterschool meals and snacks. Child Nutrition Reauthorization provides the opportunity to make the program improvements needed to expand low-income children's access to nutritious food after school. The following recommendations should be included in the reauthorization to increase the reach of the Afterschool Nutrition Programs.

Expand the Afterschool Meals Program Nationwide

The Afterschool Meal Program now is only available in 13 states and the District of Columbia. It allows afterschool programs in low-income areas to get federal funds to provide a meal to each child in the program age 18 and younger. In all other states, only children under 13 can receive meals, and only based on individual eligibility determinations, not area eligibility. The meals fed to teenagers, who often need more food than smaller children, are never reimbursable. The administrative requirements are so burdensome that fewer than 100,000 children in the entire country receive meals under this option.

The benefits of the area eligibility-based Afterschool Meal Program are too great to only allow children in a few states to access the program. Expanding the program nationwide would help reduce childhood hunger and obesity and support quality programs that keep children and teenagers, safe, supervised, and learning after school. States also would benefit from the increased federal funding and economic activity that the meal program can generate. Expanding the Afterschool Meal Program would move us closer to accomplishing the President's goal of ending child hunger by 2015, as many more children would have access to three nutritious meals a day.

In addition, the Afterschool Meal Program should be improved to make it easier for schools to participate. Currently, the meals can only be provided (including in schools) through CACFP, which requires schools to complete a tremendous amount of unnecessary administrative work. Schools must fill out another application besides one for the National

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About this series

Issue Briefs for Child Nutrition Reauthorization will explore various aspects of the child nutrition programs as Congress considers reauthorization. To learn more, visit FRAC's Web site (www.frac.org).

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School Lunch Program, participate in additional training, and keep track of slightly different program rules. As a result, fewer schools provide meals. The Afterschool Meal Program should follow the structure of the Afterschool Snack Program, which allows schools to provide the meals through the National School Lunch Program or CACFP.

Improve the Area Eligibility Test from 50 Percent to 40 Percent

Afterschool programs generally qualify to participate in the Afterschool Snack Program (and Meal Program, in states where it exists) through "area eligibility." If the program is located in a low-income area, then the program can participate and receive the standard reimbursement rate for all of the children who participate. The current definition for low-income requires that 50 percent of the children in the area be eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, a test which excludes many communities with significant numbers of low-income children. Rural and suburban communities have an especially difficult time meeting the 50 percent requirement.

The 50 percent threshold is a tougher test than other programs and keeps many summer and afterschool programs which receive other federal funds from getting nutrition dollars. There is a 40 percent threshold in the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program (the largest federal funding source for the underlying costs of afterschool and summer programs) and for school-wide summer and afterschool programs funded through Title I. Since the Afterschool Nutrition Programs are intended to support exactly these types of education programs, the threshold should be made consistent.

Improve the Ability of Providers to Serve Children Year-Round

Many nonprofit afterschool providers also run programs during the summer. In order to feed children year-round with federal support, they must operate both the Child and Adult Care Food Program during the school year and the Summer Food Service Program in summer months. Operating two child nutrition programs is extremely burdensome for providers. Each program has its own application, administrative rules, and eligibility requirements. These administrative barriers can reduce children's access to nutritious food year-round.

The 2004 Child Nutrition Reauthorization law created the Year-Round Summer Food Pilot, which provides reimbursement to nonprofit organizations in California, such as a church, a food bank, a local chapter of the YMCA or Boys & Girls Clubs of America, and local government agencies (not including schools) to feed children year-round. Through this program, children can receive a snack during the school year and meals during the summer months or during year-round schools' extended breaks, using the paperwork and rules of the Summer Food Service Program. (The only weakness of the pilot is that organizations cannot provide a meal during the school year, as discussed above.)

The upcoming Child Nutrition Reauthorization should expand the pilot to all states, and add a reimbursement for meals during the school year. This will enable year-round programs in all states to provide low-income children the nutritious food their bodies need in the most efficient and effective way.

¹ Miller, Daniel P., and Wen-Jui Han, 2008. "Maternal Nonstandard Work Schedules and Adolescent Overweight," *American Journal of Public Health* Vol. 98, No. 8, pp. 1495-1502.

² Plante, M.L.K., and K.S. Bruening, 2004. "Supper Meal Improves Diets of Children at Nutritional Risk."