

## CONGRESS MUST MAKE ACCESS TO FREE SUMMER MEALS PERMANENT, MORE STREAMLINED, AND MORE ACCESSIBLE

**About NSLA:** For 30 years, NSLA has worked to combat summer learning loss and close the achievement and opportunity gaps which research shows grows most dramatically between lower and higher income students over the summer months. Our vision is, and always has been, to ensure all young people in America, regardless of background, income, and zip-code, can participate in and benefit from a high-quality summer learning experience, every year. NSLA supports and collaborates with a broad and ever-growing network of 15,000+ leaders of school districts, youth serving government agencies, non-profit and corporate partners from across the country focused on improving the lives of youth. At the federal level, our priorities include: robust funding for a wide array of programs that support summer enrichment, youth workforce development, and access to healthy nutrition via summer meals.

**Background:** Summer is often the time of year where children go the hungriest due to a gap in meals programs provided during the school year through federal programs. Based on a March 2026 Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) report, just 16.2 children received a summer lunch for every 100 children who participated in the National School Lunch Program. While this is a significant increase in summer lunch participation from prior years — primarily due to increased federal, state, and local investments in summer learning programs — the majority of students participating in the National School Lunch Program are still not receiving summer meals.

According to the report: “Already, 14.1 million children lived in food insecure households in 2024, and that number will likely increase as fewer families qualify for SNAP or receive reduced benefits, underscoring the importance of the Summer Nutrition Programs when school meals are unavailable.” With hunger on the rise, it is critical to invest in summer meals to help keep children healthy, engaged, active, and learning.

The afterschool and summer nutrition programs provide meals and snacks at schools, parks, recreation centers, nonprofit organizations, and other sites, often combining meals with educational, enrichment, and physical activities. To qualify, these sites must be located in a low-income community or serve primarily children living in low-income households.

### What Can Congress Do to Support Access to Meals During Summer?

Clear strategies and solutions exist to provide more meals to children in need during the summer months, such as streamlining the program, reducing the eligibility threshold, and

providing full funding for more summer programs which would eliminate barriers and create opportunities to reach more families.

NSLA recommends that Congress pass a strong Child Nutrition Reauthorization bill that does the following:

- Lowers the area eligibility threshold
- Streamlines the Summer Food Service Program and Afterschool Meal Program
- Updates the SFSP nutrition standards
- Provides additional resources to support the Summer Nutrition Programs
- Creates a permanent Summer EBT Program that provides benefits to all children who receive free and reduced-price school meals to complement the Summer Nutrition Programs
- Provide the opportunity to reach children through alternative delivery models that proved to be critical during the pandemic, especially in areas with limited access to summer meals.

For any questions or follow up, please contact NSLA's Policy & Advocacy expert, Ally Talcott, at [ally.talcott@alliedforprogress.com](mailto:ally.talcott@alliedforprogress.com).