

Increasing Nutrition and Food Access

What to Learn from Your State's ESSA Plan

Child nutrition programs, including the school meals programs (the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program), after-school meals (Child and Adult Care Food Program), and the summer nutrition programs (Summer Food Service Program and National School Lunch Program) are administered at the federal level by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). At the state level, the programs are administered through the department of education, agriculture, or health. Some states have identified increasing access to child nutrition programs as an evidence-based strategy to support learning among students in their state ESSA plans.

Guidance for School Improvement

Participation in the federal child nutrition programs are critical education supports, ensuring that students are well-nourished and able to focus and learn. An extensive body of research demonstrates the negative impact of food insecurity on student outcomes, and the role of the federal nutrition programs in reducing food insecurity. School breakfast, in particular, is linked to improved academic achievement and test scores and reduced absenteeism, tardiness, and behavioral referrals. Best practices to increase access to nutritious food include: serving meals at no cost through the Community Eligibility Provision; offering breakfast after the start of the school day; sponsoring summer meal sites; and offering a snack or a meal to students during after-school educational or enrichment activities.

Additionally, increasing participation in school meals offers a significant opportunity to bring additional federal dollars into the school district. For more information on best practices, visit USDA.gov, FRAC.org, talk with local anti-hunger organizations. To find out what is happening in your district, connect directly with the LEA's school nutrition director.

Addressing Obesity

Nearly all schools are meeting the new nutrition standards for school meals, which means that students are getting more whole grains, more fruits and vegetables, and more lean meats in their school breakfasts and lunches.

Addressing Food Quality

LEAs can take steps to improve the appeal and cultural relevance of the meals served in school breakfast and lunch. The new Smart Snack rules are improving the nutritional quality of the food being sold throughout the school, including in school vending machines. The school wellness policy committee provides an important opportunity to engage on the foods being offered at school. Additionally, tapping into local resources, such as farmers, health providers, grocery stores, food banks, and other food specialists, and engaging experts within the district, such as physical health and science educators and counselor can allow schools to offer nutrition education and to offer more appealing and a wider variety of healthy foods.

Find Support for this Strategy in ESSA

TITLE I, PART A: Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies

TITLE IV, PART A: Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants

TITLE IV, PART B: 21st Century Community Learning Centers

TITLE IX, PART A: Homeless Children and Youth

Essential Stakeholders

- ✓ Students and families affected by food hardship
- ✓ Anti-hunger advocacy organizations (local, state)
- ✓ School nutrition director (district), department staff and kitchen director (school)
- ✓ Local Homeless Education Liaisons
- ✓ School board members
- ✓ Superintendent
- ✓ School business officials or budgeting directors (federal USDA reimbursement can support budget)
- ✓ National and state advocacy and membership organizations (e.g. School Nutrition Association)
- ✓ Local food bank
- ✓ Local after-school program operators (Boys and Girls Club, Parks and Rec, and libraries)
- ✓ Local food providers (e.g. grocery store)
- ✓ Teachers union, educators and educator trainers (e.g. Teachers Unite)
- ✓ Physical health professionals (school nurse, hospital, clinic, etc.)

Ask the Experts

- ✓ [ESSA Opportunities to Increase Access to Child Nutrition Programs](#) (Food Research & Action Center)
- ✓ Research Briefs: [Breakfast for Health](#), [Breakfast for Learning & Breakfast for Behavior](#) (FRAC)
- ✓ [Healthy Schools Campaign—Resources](#)



What is Food Insecurity?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines a food-insecure household as one in which “access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources.” More than 13 million children live in households that are food insecure.

Opportunities for LEAs and school leaders to address food hardship in schools include improving and increasing access to:

- School Meals (breakfast and lunch)
- Summer Food Service Program
- After-school Meals
- Child and Adult Care Food

Spotlight on Oklahoma: Addressing Food Insecurity through ESSA



The Oklahoma State Department of Education, in its ESSA plan, has taken the unique approach of using food as an academic intervention to ensure greater access to the federal school, summer, and afterschool nutrition programs. Its ESSA plan notes the linkage between food security and student achievement and thus has set out specific, measurable goals to ensure that all Oklahoma students — particularly those who need it most — receive food services across the year. It has a goal to increase participation in the Community Eligibility Provision from 34 percent to 75 percent by 2025, increase participation in the School Breakfast Program by 20 percent by 2025, and the Summer Food Service by 30 percent by 2025. In summer 2017 alone, the agency saw an increase of 14 percent in summer meals served.