

I am writing to urge you to include essential anti-hunger, anti-poverty, and child nutrition provisions as part of the Build Back Better budget reconciliation bill. These child nutrition provisions will reduce food insecurity and improve the nutrition of our nation's children at a critical time while advancing the country's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. I urge you to protect the size and scope of the package and the critical investments that will reduce food insecurity, poverty, and racial disparities and improve nutrition in this country.

The pandemic has left so many children, particularly Black, Latinx, and Indigenous children behind. Due to systemic and historical racism, for far too long, children of color have been left behind. Data demonstrate that children who live in poverty and in food-insecure households are more likely than their food-secure peers to have poor educational, health, and economic outcomes. Today, more than 12 million children are living in poverty and 13 million may face hunger this year, with Black and Latinx households with children much more likely to experience poverty and food hardship than White households with children. Approximately 4 in 10 families with parents who are Hispanic/Latinx (39.1 percent) and parents who are Black (40.8 percent) reported food insecurity in the prior 30 days, almost triple the rate of families with White parents (15.1 percent). Before the pandemic, 10.8 million children lived in households with incomes between 130 and 200 percent of the federal poverty line, earning too much to qualify for free school meals but too little to get by. Fifty-eight percent are children of color. This increases the importance of offering meals at no charge to all students and the need for charitable food for families.

Although COVID-19 relief measures — like the implementation of the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) program, increased Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and the expansion of the Child Tax Credit (CTC) — have reduced food insecurity from its peak, the rate remains alarmingly high.

Moreover, research has shown the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program provide the healthiest meals that many children access, supporting good nutrition and health while reducing hunger and supporting academic achievement and educational outcomes. Community eligibility has highlighted the value of offering school breakfast and lunch to all students, and the investments in the budget reconciliation will allow more schools to take this important step. Furthermore, Medicaid direct certification will better link eligible children to free and reduced-price school meals. Investments in school meal equipment grants and improving quality will support further improvements to nutrition.

During the summer, millions of children lose access to the nutritious meals they receive at school during the school year. Of the 20 million children receiving free or reduced-price school lunch during the 2018–2019 school year (prior to the pandemic), only 2.8 million participated in the summer meals programs in July 2019, meaning sites are only reaching about 14 percent of potential need. Research shows Summer EBT is an effective and efficient method for addressing hunger during the summer.

To help end child hunger, I ask that the following provisions are maintained throughout the budget reconciliation bill.

- Expand the number of schools that would be able to offer free meals to all students through the Community Eligibility Provision by increasing the multiplier (that determines the amount of federal reimbursement that a community eligibility school receives) from 1.6 to 2.5 and lowering the eligibility threshold to 25 percent.
- Give states the option to implement the Community Eligibility Provision statewide.
- Allow all states to conduct Medicaid direct certification.
- Extend Summer EBT nationwide for students who receive free or reduced-price school meals to close the summer meal gap.
- Provide \$500 million for school kitchen equipment grants.
- Provide \$634 million for a Healthy School Meal Incentives demonstration project.

These provisions take important steps to increase access to and improve the nutrition of school meals, particularly for children of color, making a significant step in the direction of Healthy School Meals for All, and closing the summer meal gap, both of which will put our nation firmly on the pathway to ending hunger and increasing racial equity. Combined with the anti-poverty provisions in the Build Back Better Act, as well as investments in local emergency hunger relief, these provisions will help ensure that millions more children will have the nutrition they need to learn, grow, and thrive 365 days a year while also lifting them out of poverty.