

Democratic controlled Congress allows funding for school meal programs to expire, threatening 10 million children with hunger

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Federal support for school lunches is set to expire at the end of the month after the US Congress refused to renew funds for a school meal program implemented in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The program waived food assistance requirements and allowed schools to reimburse costs for providing free lunches to all students. It provided \$11 billion a year to schools, enabling them to provide breakfast and lunch to millions of students.

However, despite being extended by Congress two times before, the Democrats who control both the House and the Senate have decided it is no longer worth funding. By cutting the program from this year's \$1.5 trillion dollar federal budget, Congress has opened the door for hunger to return to nearly 10 million school age children this summer, a figure that is only likely to worsen as the school year returns in the fall.

Jillian Meier, director of the advocacy group No Kid Hungry, told the *Guardian*, "I think we're going to see in real time the summer hunger crisis grow, and that's going to give us a preview of what's going to happen next school year."

As food prices continue to skyrocket amid decades-high inflation, schools are being placed under an extreme amount of pressure. During the program they could rely on a steady reimbursement of \$4.56 per meal for all students. Now they will only receive \$3.66 for participating students as qualification restrictions go back into effect.

The financial strain on schools will hit quickly. With food prices rapidly rising, reports have emerged of school officials shopping at Costco early in the morning to try and buy cheap food items in bulk. Some school districts have been forced to cut back on the

number of food options and even the quality of the food, which could carry additional financial penalties as schools struggle to meet standards issued by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which oversees federal school meal programs.

Before the waivers have even been cut, schools were already struggling to keep meal programs running. According to USDA deputy undersecretary Stacy Dean, speaking to the *Washington Post* in March, "Ninety percent of schools are using the waivers and only 75 percent of them are breaking even." And with a decline in school personnel during the pandemic, schools additionally lack the labor to improve services.

"We literally believe we're going to go off a cliff June 30," Katie Wilson, executive director of the Urban School Food Alliance told Vox. "And we simply don't have the labor to go back to doing what we did [pre-pandemic]. We have school districts that are missing hundreds of people, so to expect them to account for every kid and what their family income is ridiculous."

Millions of parents have been suddenly thrust into an impossible situation as well. They will have to somehow come up with the money to replace school meals that once provided up to 50 percent of their children's daily caloric intake. Not only this, but school officials have noted that registering for free or reduced lunches under the previous requirements could be a year-long process.

Teachers and school workers often begin speaking with parents about meal programs in the fall, preparing them for registration for the following school year. Now schools will have to process millions of applications in a matter of months and many families may not be aware of or able to complete registration in

time, leaving them without the assistance they need.

This drastic cut to food services will have severe impacts on children's health and ability to learn. According to a study by No Kid Hungry, providing access to summer meals for students could increase the number of high school graduates by 82,000 and save over \$50 billion in educational costs each year. This is because hungry students are unable to learn effectively and often suffer from extensive learning loss over the summer, requiring additional funds to be dedicated to assist them. Not only this, but undernourished children are 31 percent more likely to be hospitalized with an average hospital bill of \$12,000, a cost that could throw a family into debt for years.

Blame for the cut has quickly been placed by the Democrats on Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, who blocked the passage of the Kids Not Red Tape Act proposed by Democratic Senator from Michigan Debbie Stabenow this March. However, funding for the waiver was never included in the initial budget proposal, and despite bi-partisan support, never received any significant efforts by Senate Democrats to ensure its passage.

Ultimately, the Democrats are in agreement with McConnell that pandemic era social measures must come to an end and that the gutting of what has become an essential service preventing child hunger is necessary to force parents back into the workplace.

“There is no urgency and political appetite to even have this conversation,” said Meier. “Frankly this is not a priority for Congress and the White House. People are really focused on having a ‘return to normal’ ... folks aren't talking about it and they have no clue that this crisis is looming.”



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