

Nutrition Matters for Illinois' Kids

Increasing access to school meals can help strengthen national security

In Illinois, 70 percent of youth ages 17-24 are ineligible for military service, and obesity is a primary cause. In 2018, 14.2 percent of 10-17 year olds in Illinois were obese, slightly lower than the national rate of 15.8 percent. Obesity in childhood can cause high blood pressure, joint problems, and asthma, as well as an increased risk of obesity in adulthood.

Contributing to high obesity rates is the fact that many children and adults do not consume enough fresh fruits and vegetables. School meals, provided through programs like the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), can help address these unhealthy eating habits. The NSLP provides vegetables, fruit, lean protein, whole grains, and low-fat or fat-free milk with each school lunch. Children who participate consume more fruits and vegetables than their peers who do not eat school lunch. Participation in NSLP is associated with lower body mass index, and estimates suggest that free or reduced-price school lunches can reduce obesity rates by at least 17 percent.

Illinois School Meal Standards

Foods served in Illinois schools must be trans fat free, and serving sizes are determined by grade level (K-5, 6-8, and 9-12). Calorie

minimums and maximums ensure that school lunches account for approximately one third of the recommended daily calories for each grade group. Schools must serve a variety of vegetables weekly, to ensure that children receive the appropriate combination of vitamins and minerals. Half of all grains offered during the school week must be Whole Grain-Rich, meaning that at least half of the grains in the food item are whole grains. One study found that improved school meal standards increased students' consumption of entrees from 71 percent to 84 percent.

“When we prioritize a nutritious and appetizing cafeteria lunch tray, we are encouraging habits leading to a healthy and successful adulthood.”

— Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Roger Machut
U. S. Marine Corps

Policy Recommendations

Illinois appropriated the Healthy Local Foods Incentive Fund at \$500,000 for FY21, for the first time since the bill was passed in 2017. This fund provides double value for SNAP for families to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at venues such as farmers markets. Increased access to these foods will help children get the nutrition they need, as family budgets may be stretched due to the pandemic. To ensure that all Illinois children continue to have access to healthy meals, the state's high standards for school nutrition should be upheld. The Illinois State Board of Education should adopt procurement policies that prioritize local, nutritious, and environmentally sustainable foods. Moving forward, schools should utilize these guidelines in procurement contracts.

Illinois should continue school meal improvements such as increasing whole grains and reducing sodium, and developing guidelines for school districts to implement these higher standards. Illinois should increase reimbursement rates for schools providing meals.

These meals must be offered in school districts that offer summer meal programs and have 50 percent participation in free or reduced price lunch.

Illinois must work to increase participation for Breakfast After the Bell. During the 2018-2019 school year, only about half of students who participated in school lunch ate breakfast at school. Studies show that providing breakfast outside the cafeteria makes breakfast more accessible to students, and increases participation in school breakfast programs.

Mission: Readiness

Retired admirals and generals strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble.

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

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