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Schools call on Congress to boost school meals funding

By Agri-Pulse Staff

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With Congress overdue to reauthorize the Child Nutrition Act, federal reimbursement for free school meals doesn't cover the costs according to a School Nutrition Association (SNA) report released during National School Lunch Week October 12-16.

As more of America's children are depending on free and reduced price school meals during the economic downturn, schools are grappling with rising costs that surpass the federal reimbursement rate for these meals. The SNA report shows that three-quarters of school nutrition directors surveyed nationwide said the National School Lunch Program Reimbursement failed to cover the costs of producing a meal during the 2008-2009 school year – with the same shortfall expected for this year.

SNA, a national non-profit organization, has found that the average cost to prepare and serve a school lunch that meets federal nutritional standards is \$2.92. The federal reimbursement rate for that free lunch is only \$2.68, leaving financially strapped schools to make up the substantial funding gap. SNA is calling on Congress to provide greater federal support for school meals during reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act this fall.

“School nutrition programs offer affordable, healthy meals to students, and we are working to keep meal prices reasonable, but schools are getting squeezed by federal reimbursements that simply do not keep pace with rising costs on everything from food and labor to napkins and spoons,” said SNA President Dora Rivas, MS, RD, SNS, who is executive director of Food and Child Nutrition Services for the Dallas Independent School District in Texas.

Over half of school districts indicated that they expect to face continued increases in the cost of food, supplies, labor, gas and transportation. In spite of these additional financial pressures, school officials say they are not compromising on nutritional quality. School nutrition professionals are addressing fiscal challenges in a variety of ways.

- 46 percent plan to decrease their labor force
- 45 percent plan to increase meal and/or a la carte prices
- 44 percent plan to decrease financial reserves

Financial challenges faced by school nutrition programs come as student participation rates are higher than ever before. With the U.S. unemployment rate at 9.5% last month, more students are qualifying for free or reduced price lunches.

- In the 2008-2009 school year alone, 800,000 additional students received free and reduced price lunches.
- 78 percent of school nutrition directors surveyed have already noticed an increased number of students eligible to receive free or reduced price meals for the 2009-2010 school year.

Furthermore, while rising school enrollment contributes to increasing participation in the National School Lunch Program, school lunch participation gains during the 2008-2009 school year were more than five times the gains in student enrollment.

“No one can deny the importance of a healthy meal in contributing to a child’s academic success,” said Rivas. “During reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act, Congress must increase funding for school nutrition programs to ensure students continue to receive healthy, balanced school meals.”

“In the Pressure Cooker: School Meals Race Rising Costs & Participation” is an analysis of two surveys conducted by the School Nutrition Association in 2009. SNA’s School Nutrition Operations Survey included detailed information on issues impacting school nutrition from 1,207 school nutrition directors nationwide. Building on these findings, in September 2009, SNA conducted a Back to School Trends Survey which focused on understanding the financial pressures school nutrition programs have faced in the current and previous school years. This survey netted 310 responses.