

# **Pennsylvania Chapter**

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**Testimony on behalf of the**

**Pennsylvania Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics**

**To the Pennsylvania State House Children & Youth Committee and the House  
Education Committee**

**Joint Informational Meeting of the House Children & Youth Committee and the  
House Education Committee  
Importance of Childhood Nutrition and School Meals**

**March 30, 2023**

Good morning, Chairwoman Bullock, Chairman Jozwiak, and members of the House Children and Youth and Education Committees. Thank you to my fellow panelists who have joined us today to discuss such a critical children's health issue; it is a pleasure to learn from each of you and to hear your unique perspectives.

My name is Dr. Amaka Nnamani. I am a general pediatrician based in Harrisburg, PA and an advocate for breastfeeding and infant nutrition. I would first like to thank the members of the House Children and Youth Committee and the House Education Committee for giving me the opportunity to speak with you all. I am proud to join you today as a representative of the Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, a non-profit professional organization of nearly 2,300 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children and adolescents, to discuss the importance of childhood nutrition and school meals.

I'd like to start by establishing what constitutes a nutritious meal. Next, I'd like to discuss the effects of child nutrition on short and long-term health outcomes. I'd also like to outline the relationship between child nutrition and academic performance and long-term success. In closing, I will discuss why it is critical that we expand access to nutritious school meals for children across the Commonwealth.

The American Academy of Pediatrics supports school meals that follow the [\*Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020–2025\*](#), which recommends that people aged 2 years or older follow a healthy eating pattern that includes a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fat-free and low-fat dairy products, a variety of protein foods, and healthy oils.

To qualify for reimbursement, all lunches provided under the National School Lunch Program must meet federal nutrition requirements, which state that school lunches must offer foods from the five required components that include whole or enriched grain, fruit, vegetable, meat/meat alternate, and fluid milk. Serving sizes vary based on the grade level of the students. Therefore, the AAP considers lunches that are provided under the National School Lunch Program, nutritious<sup>1</sup>.

We all know that nutrition is key to health, but there is no time more critical to lifelong health than the childhood years. Proper nutrition in the child and adolescent years is essential to keeping current and future generations healthy across the lifespan. A healthy diet helps children grow and develop properly and reduces their risk of developing chronic diseases later in life. In addition, healthy meals are an essential component of learning and growing. Child malnutrition has been linked to poor health outcomes, inadequate growth, and hindered cognitive development, while proper nutrition has been linked with stronger academic performance, lower rates of school absenteeism, and higher lifelong wages and earnings.

A child's diet can have both short and long-term implications for their health. One short-term effect of poor nutrition is weight gain, which can cause a child to become overweight or obese. Being overweight and obese are associated with health risks such as Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke. Other short-term effects of poor child nutrition include iron deficiency and the development of cavities.

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<sup>1</sup> Testimony of Lee Savio Beers, MD, FAAP President, American Academy of Pediatrics On Behalf of the American Academy of Pediatrics Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry "Child Nutrition Reauthorization: Healthy Meals and Healthy Futures" March 25, 2021

Children who do not receive adequate nutrition are also at a higher risk of developing conditions such as heart disease, cancer, osteoporosis, and high blood pressure in adulthood.

Not only does childhood nutrition affect a child's short- and long-term health outcomes, but it can also play a significant role in their ability to learn. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, children who eat less fruits, vegetables and dairy tend to have lower grades, and nutrient deficits, such as vitamins A, B6, B12, C, iron, zinc, folate and calcium, are linked to higher rates of absenteeism, tardiness and poor grades.

Inadequate nutritional intake can also affect the formation of human capital. Deficiencies in zinc, iodine, iron, and folate have been linked to worse cognitive development of school-aged children in developed countries ([Pollitt and Gorman, 1994](#); [Delange, 2000](#); [Bryan et al., 2004](#); [Feyrer et al., 2017](#); [Niemesch, 2015](#)). Nutritious school lunches can make students more attentive and raise their energy level, thereby improving academic performance. When President Lyndon B. Johnson expanded the National School Lunch Program in 1966 to include school breakfasts and meals at preschools, he argued that "good nutrition is essential to good learning", and as pediatricians, we know this to be true.

Every day, more than one million children and students across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania receive meals through Federal School Nutrition Programs, including the National School Lunch Program, The School Breakfast Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program and the Summer Food Service Program. We also know that children consume 35% to 40% of their energy within the school setting<sup>2</sup>. It is therefore, critical that the food being offered in schools is nutritious.

School-provided meals are also important because they increase access to nutritious foods for children who might not otherwise have access to these foods. For some students, school meals are the only chance that they will have to eat a nutritious meal during the day. Programs that offer free school lunches are critical – these programs advance health equity by making it easier for students from households with lower incomes to access nutritious meals.

School meals programs have a profound effect on the diet quality of children, especially for children at risk for food insecurity. While all students can participate in school meal programs, it is important that these meals are nutritious and that they are offered to as many students as possible. Nutritional targets for all school meal programs are based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs). DGAs stress energy balance and nutrient density within a student's diet. Nearly 56 million US children spend time in early childcare and education facilities or public schools, and these settings can directly influence what children eat and drink. These settings help to build a foundation for healthy eating habits across the lifespan.

Good nutrition is essential to health, and good health is essential to effective learning. Given the double burden of food insecurity and obesity facing our children, it is essential that the meals children receive in school are nutritionally sound and based on the best available nutrition science. Children typically

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/school-health/nutrition-in-schools/>

consume up to half of their daily calories in school, and for some children, the only food they eat each day comes from the federal school meal programs.<sup>3</sup>

Providing widespread access to nutritious school meals is critical to promoting the health and well-being of our children in Pennsylvania. I'll leave you today with a statement from former First Lady Michelle Obama, who said, "The cafeteria is one of the most important classrooms in the entire school, because our kids don't stop learning at lunchtime. Every day, with the food you serve, you're teaching them these critical lessons about nutrition and healthy eating. You're shaping their habits and their preferences, and you're affecting the choices that they're going to make for the rest of their lives. So now just multiply that by the 31 million kids in the school meal program, and it's clear that all of you don't just shape the future of individual students; you help to shape the future of this country."

If you have any questions about what I've shared today, I would be happy to answer questions now, or in follow-up communications.

Thank you, again, Chairwoman Bullock, Chairman Jozwiak, and members of the House Children and Youth and Education Committees for your time and attention. My colleagues and I at the PA AAP are grateful for the opportunity to have addressed you all today.

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<sup>3</sup> Testimony of Lee Savio Beers, MD, FAAP President, American Academy of Pediatrics On Behalf of the American Academy of Pediatrics Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry "Child Nutrition Reauthorization: Healthy Meals and Healthy Futures" March 25, 2021