

 DATA FOR *PROGRESS*

VOTERS SUPPORT OVERHAULING AMERICA'S SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

School meals are an investment in our children. We should treat them accordingly.

AUSTIN FRERICK

Nearly two-thirds of Americans, including a majority on both sides of the aisle, want the federal government to ensure that school lunches are fresh, healthy, prepared onsite, and locally grown. This polling indicates strong support for overhauling meal programs in America's schools, which would create structural change in the country's food economy and lead to a number of benefits for schoolchildren, farmers, and workers.

Although it may not be immediately apparent, overhauling America's school meal programs can serve as an effective change-agent for realigning the American economy. Schools buy a lot of food, and they buy it predictably and reliably. In fact, school cafeterias across the country serve nearly [five billion lunches](#) a year. By leveraging this purchasing power, we can shift food supply chains to revitalize rural communities, combat climate change, produce healthier food, and improve labor conditions for workers.

These actions can also improve the health and well-being of our children. An [analysis](#) by the Brookings Institute found that improving the nutritional quality of school meals is one of the more cost-effective investments schools can make in improving test scores. Reducing class size, by way of comparison, requires spending *five times* as much for the same benefit. And at a time when [one in five](#) school-aged children suffer from obesity and one in three are overweight, it has the potential to be an effective public health intervention as well.

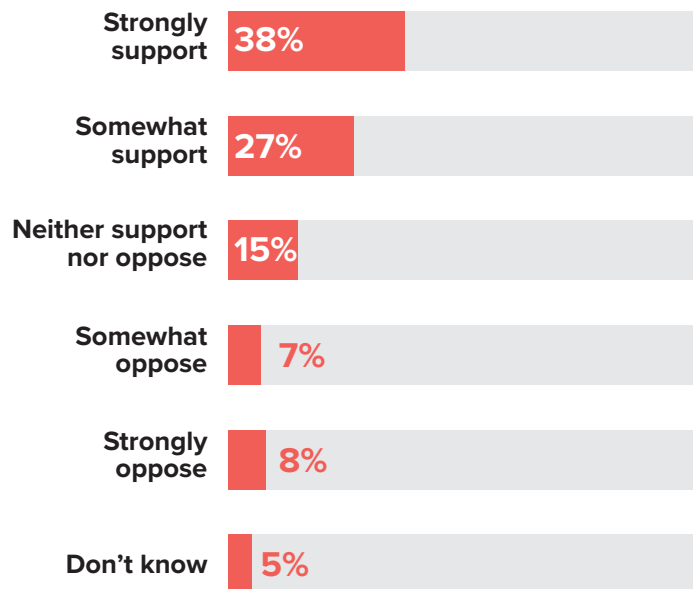
Fostering local supply chains also ensures that more money is kept circulating in the local economy. Instead of paying significant amounts of money to multinational corporations with little or no ties to their districts, schools would instead support small and medium-sized farms that are located nearby, offering them a steady demand for their crops. Schools can also mitigate their contribution to climate change because [less carbon](#) is emitted when food is not transported thousands of miles.

Moreover, we can use school meal programs to improve the pay and conditions for food-service workers. Currently, many schools outsource their cafeteria labor to companies that have an incentive to increase profits by cutting worker pay. The outsourcing of food-service workers needs to stop. There is no reason that a high school graduate shouldn't be able to earn a middle-class wage by cooking made-from-scratch meals for their local school. Improving food quality for schoolchildren requires elevating the respect we show for the workers who cook their food.

It is time that we make the easy, popular choice and overhaul America's school meal programs, supporting our local workforces and economies while providing our children with fresh, healthy food.

SUPPORT LOCAL, FRESH, NUTRITIOUS SCHOOL LUNCHES

Would you support or oppose a policy to spend federal revenue on school lunches to provide students with locally-grown, fresh, and nutritious food prepped on-site?



Model Legislation

The goals of a school meals program should be to:

- ▶ Source food as locally as possible. Shorter supply routes are better for the environment and keep money circulating in local economies.
- ▶ Serve the healthiest possible meal to reduce childhood obesity and instill healthy eating habits.
- ▶ Ensure that food-service workers, particularly those working in school cafeterias, earn a solid middle-class wage.

Congress should enact a grant program that makes additional funds available to any school district that overhauls its school meals according to the three items above. This opt-in nature of this program prevents a backlash because school districts would not be forced to behave a certain way.

School districts accepted into this program will receive:

- ▶ Double their reimbursement rate for each meal served.
- ▶ Funds to improve kitchens.
- ▶ Funds for renovations to home economics classrooms.
- ▶ Funds for creating a garden and/or farm on school grounds.

By accepting these funds, districts agree that:

- ▶ They will not charge for school meals.
- ▶ They will not outsource cafeteria workers.
- ▶ All food purchased will be grown and produced in America.
- ▶ They will source a certain percentage of their food from farms located near the district.
- ▶ They will accept higher nutritional guidelines for meals.

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