

**40**  
**WEEKS**

**E A R L B L U M E N A U E R**

**#6 Childhood Nutrition**

**40**  
**IDEAS**

**Background**

Americans care deeply about childhood education, which is building America's future for our communities, our economy, and our families. Yet when it comes to educating healthy children – providing healthy food and developing good dietary habits – our track record is unfortunate.

To start, too many children come from families that are food insecure, lacking regular access to healthy food. One half of American children will be on food stamps in their lifetime. Every month, 63% of teachers buy food for children in their classrooms because they face such a need. Over 20% of American households are just plain hungry. Sadly, in my state of Oregon, those percentages are even higher.

We also too often provide food that doesn't offer the right nutrition. Many children who aren't hungry per se are instead hungry for the right foods, and not just the empty calories of which they consume far too many. Pizza, soda and baked goods are the top three sources of calories for our children, which is part of the reason that childhood obesity has doubled since 1980. Today, one in three children is overweight or obese.

One of the most direct ways to attack the problem is in our schools, where over 31 million children receive over five billion meals every year. It's no longer just school lunches, in fact; our schools increasingly provide school breakfasts and school dinners. That's because far too many low-income children experience school as the only place they are going to get the food they need.

Yet school food is too often high in starch and lacks fresh fruits and vegetables. Indeed, 40% of American children do not get fresh fruits and vegetables in school on a daily basis. Recently,

Congress actually held up funding for the new nutritional guidelines for school meals. It's well past time for us to get our act together.

### Solution

In honor of [National School Breakfast Week](#) , here are some reforms we should make:

- Exchanging Credits for Commodities: School districts currently receive part of their federal reimbursement dollars in the form of commodities; i.e., food products supplied by the United States Department of Agriculture. Receiving credits instead of food commodities would give school districts the flexibility to purchase local food products, supporting local economies as they meet their students' nutritional needs.

- Expanding the Farm to School program: The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act added \$40 million to the existing Farm to School program, but it's still not enough; demand for this program is three times the available funding. Every school interested in providing healthier food to their students should have the opportunity to do so. It's good for our children's health and it's good for local farmers.

- Increasing access and nutrition: Our children face nutrition problems far greater than those faced by their grandparents in the 1960s, when federal subsidies for school lunch programs began. Fifty years ago, the biggest concern was the lack of calories. Today, almost 30% of children under the age of 18 are overweight, lacking not calories, but good nutrition. It's time we addressed the health and nutrition of today's children.

<Previous Idea

Next Idea >

**40**  
**WEEKS**

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**40**  
**IDEAS**