House Bill Restricting Free School Meals Could Increase Food Insecurity

Population Health Sciences

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A federal child nutrition reauthorization bill, which advanced in the U.S. House of Representatives last week, includes a provision that would severely restrict schools' eligibility for community eligibility, an option within the national school breakfast and lunch programs that allows high-poverty schools to provide free meals to all students. Community eligibility, which was created in 2010 as a way to reduce stigma, food insecurity and burdensome paperwork, permits schools that have at least 40% of students who qualify for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) to serve free meals to all students. The *Improving Child Nutrition and Education Act of 2016* (H.R. 5003) would, however, increase that threshold to 60%, causing more than 7,000 of the 18,000 schools currently using community eligibility to be disqualified, resulting in more than 3 million children nationwide losing their access to free school meals.

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The Community Eligibility Provision, which was established by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act in 2010, eliminates the stigmatizing school meal application and eases schools' administrative burden and costs by eliminating the need to determine SNAP eligibility on a student-by-student basis. Over the past few years, community eligibility has been a success in Pennsylvania, with 240 schools participating, including 70 in Philadelphia and its suburbs, affecting more than 132,000 children.

Several organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, are opposed to H.R. 5003, citing its potential for weakening children's access to healthy, nutritious meals and increasing the food insecurity of low-income students. Food insecurity, defined as a lack of access to enough food for an active and healthy life, affects 21%, or 16 million children in the U.S. and has been associated with anemia, parental report of poor health, psychosocial and behavioral problems and poor academic performance.

In January, the Senate Agriculture Committee advanced a child nutrition reauthorization bill that did not contain a change to the community eligibility provision.

While H.R. 5003 will likely not affect the poorest students in schools because they will still be able to qualify for free meals, children living in "working poor" families, who often make too much money to qualify for benefits such as SNAP but still struggle to put food on their tables, will be most affected.

Last summer at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) Care Network, we began routinely screening for food insecurity in six suburban practices – areas not traditionally thought of as being affected by food insecurity and poverty. We have found that food insecurity is prevalent in many of these suburban areas, and the school meals program may be one of the few programs these families are able to rely on. As one mother, who screened positive for food insecurity, reported, "We make too much to qualify for food stamps, but don't make enough to pay our bills."

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While it remains unclear when H.R. 5003 will be considered by the full U.S. House of Representatives, its passage could have detrimental effects on the food security and nutrition of millions of children, including numerous children in the CHOP network.