



How the Child and Adult Care Food Program Improves Early Childhood Education

By Christine Binder, Joel Berg, Maryam Adamu, and Katie Hamm

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Introduction and summary

For many American families, finding high-quality, affordable child care is an impossible task. But it is also a necessary one, given that most families cannot afford to have a full-time, stay-at-home caregiver.¹ Early childhood education and care programs give parents the opportunity to work, but they also have the capacity to offer important learning opportunities for children at a crucial stage of development. Unfortunately, they are too often cost prohibitive; annual child care costs are currently higher than the cost of in-state tuition and fees at public universities in more than 30 states.² Furthermore, research shows that the child care options many families struggle to afford are usually of poor or mediocre quality.³

One of the many tools the nation has to support low-income families and their young children is the Child and Adult Care Food Program, or CACFP. Managed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, or USDA, and administered by states and nonprofit groups, CACFP provides snacks and meals to more than 3 million children at child care centers, family day care homes, Head Start programs, after-school programs, and homeless shelters.⁴ In 2014, the program funded nearly 2 billion meals; the vast majority of these went to children younger than 5.⁵ Subsidizing meals defrays overall child care costs for parents and contributes to children's ability to thrive and learn. Beyond this, CACFP also has a track record of supporting healthy and safe child care environments.⁶

The upcoming federal child nutrition reauthorization, or CNR, process provides Congress the opportunity to support early childhood through CACFP. This report makes a case for why Congress should include provisions in the CNR bill to reduce participation barriers for programs and providers and maximize the program's potential.

Specifically, the reauthorization bill should:

- **Increase reimbursement rates** to more fully cover the costs of meals
- **Reduce the CACFP area eligibility test** to 40 percent of residents living below the federal poverty line, or FPL
- **Allow three meals per day in CACFP** to account for the reality that many parents are now working longer and nontraditional hours
- **Reduce CACFP paperwork** by expanding direct certification and reforming the complex, two-tiered reimbursement system for family child care homes
- **Bolster the use of CACFP in ensuring safe child care settings**
- **Create a small pilot grant program** to reward states for using CACFP to support food related costs in preschool expansion

CACFP is a relatively small program, costing \$3 billion annually; this is only about 1/25th the level of the budget of the largest federal nutrition assistance program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.⁷ Because CACFP plays an outsized function by leveraging resources, Congress should make a concerted effort to make the program even stronger.

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