

# Advancing School Nutrition Policy

## The Challenge

More than 30 million U.S. children—particularly those in communities with low income—depend on school meals for daily nutrition. Yet for decades, outdated policies, political pressure, and shifting standards have left these programs vulnerable to underinvestment and rollback.

## HER's Role

HER has built a two-decade body of independent, rigorous research that has shaped, strengthened, and protected school nutrition policies. HER-funded studies have:

- Modeled the public health impact of meal standards
- Analyzed sugar content in school meals and snacks
- Evaluated the fiscal and health benefits of universal free meal programs

## Impact

- **Landmark Policy:** Informed the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) — the most comprehensive update to school meal standards in decades.
- **Premier Evaluation Tool:** Funded the [\*Wellness School Assessment Tool\*](#), which is used by schools in all 50 states to evaluate how their wellness policies address different facets of school-based health programs including nutrition initiatives.
- **Policy Defense:** Helped block 2020 USDA rollbacks to nutrition standards through a rapid-response Health Impact Assessment.
- **New Guidelines:** Contributed to the first-ever federal limit on added sugars in school meals.
- **Expanding Access:** Supported policy momentum for free school meals for all students, with nine states enacting new laws.

## Why it Matters

School meals are one of the most effective tools to support children's health, academic success, and long-term well-being. HER ensures that nutrition policy is rooted in evidence—not just advocacy—and responsive to the real-world needs of schools, families, and communities.

## In Depth

HER's research was foundational to the HHFKA of 2010, which raised nutrition standards for meals and competitive foods like vending machine snacks. These updates led to [\*measurable improvements\*](#) in children's diets across the country.

In 2020, when the USDA proposed rolling back those standards, HER mobilized quickly. [\*A Health Impact Assessment\*](#) projected the potential harm of the changes—from reduced meal participation to increased sugar and sodium intake. The findings informed public comments, media coverage, and policymaker discussions, helping preserve higher standards.

HER's more recent work includes a [\*study on added sugars\*](#) that informed the Center for Science in the Public Interest's School Meals Corporate Report Card and contributed to the USDA's first-ever rule limiting added sugar in school meals. Another study evaluated the benefits of [\*universal free meals\*](#), showing that offering meals to all students, regardless of income, is both cost-effective and impactful.

