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Your Question:

You asked for information on innovative school nutrition programs.

Our Response:

[Research](#) shows that hunger severely impedes students' ability to focus, and, more specifically, that a lack of adequate consumption of fruits, vegetables, or dairy products is associated with lower grades among students. Furthermore, deficits of specific nutrients are associated with higher rates of absenteeism and tardiness.

There are several federal programs to address student hunger. Funded and nationally administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service, four primary federal programs exist to ensure students are well-fed and able to focus on learning throughout the school year: the [National School Lunch Program](#), the [Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program](#), the [School Breakfast Program](#) and the [Special Milk Program](#). At the state level, these programs are often run by [state education agencies](#). State policy efforts related to school nutrition generally seek to complement federal school nutrition policies. While local school nutrition programs must fall in-line with state and federal policies and requirements, there are some innovative programs that exist at the local level.

State School Nutrition Efforts

The [School Nutrition Association](#) tracks and reports on state policies related to school nutrition each quarter. Their most recent report, the [2018 Second Quarter State Legislative Report](#), provides an overview of state legislation related to school nutrition from April 1 - June 30 2018. According to this report, there were 7 school nutrition bills signed into law during this period of time. Generally, policy trends in this quarter were related to [Unpaid meal balances](#) and [Breakfast After the Bell](#) programs. In past quarters and years, states have also introduced legislation to encourage the local procurement of foods and to curb food waste through liability protections for schools that seek to donate excess food.

Federal School Nutrition Efforts

Since the passage of the [Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act](#) in 2010, the [nutritional quality](#) of school meals has improved. However, school administrators and other stakeholders sometimes feel that this law places unnecessary burdens on school lunch programs, and the [challenges](#) of implementing this law have been [well-documented](#). Still, providing children adequate nutrition and giving them an opportunity to focus in school remains a bi-partisan policy goal. The USDA supports and supplements these programs through a variety of initiatives to improve school meal programs, incorporate local foods and feed kids when school is out:

- **Improving meal programs:** The [Team Nutrition](#) initiative provides training to child nutrition professionals, and seeks to improve practices of child nutrition programs, by providing resources to schools, child care settings, and summer meal sites. One of the primary purposes of this initiative is to communicate healthy food and activity options through materials (handouts, posters, games, songs, etc.), developed via programs such as [MyPlate](#), which give children, parents, and teachers an opportunity to talk about healthy food and activity choices. Team Nutrition schools are also eligible for voluntary certification through the [HealthierUS School Challenge: Smarter Lunchrooms](#) program, which recognizes schools that have created healthier school environments through promotion of nutrition and physical activity. As of January 2017, more than 4,000 schools have been certified.

- **Incorporating local foods:** The [Farm to School Program](#) provides grants, training, technical assistance and research to help child nutrition providers incorporate and promote local foods in school cafeterias, introduce children to local nutrition by holding taste tests/demos of local foods (among other activities), and teach children about the sources of their food by conducting field trips to local farms or orchards. According to the 2015 [USDA Farm to School Census](#), more than 5,200 school districts (encompassing more than 42,000 schools) were participating in farm to school activities, reaching approximately 23.6 million children with information about healthy eating and local agriculture.
- **Summer meal programs:** The [Summer Food Service Program](#) (SFSP) and the [Seamless Summer Option](#) program provide low-income kids and teens with meals when school is out of session. The SFSP operates in schools, parks, camps, community centers, housing projects, churches and other sites. In [July 2015](#) alone, the SFSP provided 2.6 million children with meals each day. Schools that participate in traditional school meal programs that also apply for the Seamless Summer Option program can use the same meal service rules and claiming procedures as those used during the school year, minimizing the paperwork burden of providing summer meals to kids.

Local Programs

Innovation in school nutrition programs usually involves improving students' health by encouraging them to make better food choices. [PEW Charitable Trusts surveyed schools](#) in Connecticut, Texas and Washington to examine how school meal programs were innovating to improve school nutrition. The survey showed that under updated federal nutrition standards, children's eating habits were improving, and food waste was decreasing. Almost two-thirds of directors who increased the use of salad bars said that kids ate more produce as a result and survey respondents indicated that holding taste tests with students and redistributing uneaten, sealed foods were among the most effective ways to reduce waste.

[FoodTank](#), a think tank focused on improving health through food, published an [article](#) highlighting 16 innovative school nutrition programs that are improving student health. Among the highlighted programs are the Baltimore Public School System, Berkeley Unified School District and Shelby County Nutrition Services in Tennessee. This [Wired article](#) from 2014 presents an interesting take on school meal delivery, however, it does not provide any concrete examples of schools using these innovative strategies.