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No Free Lunch? Schools Worry Kids Left Out by Meal Program Cuts

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More than a quarter of a million schoolchildren stand to lose their free school lunches under a provision in the stalled House farm bill. Republican lawmakers say many of the children would still be eligible for low-price meals, but school officials worry about unforeseen impacts from such a move.

Schools fear their students may be too embarrassed to sign up for the low-cost meals or quit attending if the farm bill provision becomes law. Additionally, they worry the change would be felt in school districts' bottom lines. For example, if enough students go from free to reduced-price lunch, some districts could lose their eligibility for a program where all students get free meals, an arrangement in use by more than 3,500 districts nationwide.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates the farm bill (H.R. 2) language designed to tighten eligibility for the program formerly known as food stamps—now the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—would also deny access to free school meals to 265,000 children from families not otherwise eligible.

“This is an example of the negative ripple effect that come from such deep cuts to SNAP,” Stacy Dean, vice president for food assistance policy, at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, told Bloomberg Government.

The House farm bill currently is in legislative limbo. It was defeated 198-213 on the House floor May 18, after 30 Republicans joined all Democrats in opposition after pressing for a vote on an unrelated immigration bill. The farm bill may get a second chance, though, with a deadline to vote on a motion to reconsider the measure extended to June 22. Language allowing for reconsideration was attached to the rule governing floor consideration of three bills last month.

The bill's SNAP changes would limit categorical eligibility—which means recipients automatically qualify for benefits because they participate in other federal or state poverty-relief programs—to households with gross monthly incomes of no more than 130 percent of the

federal poverty level. Currently, most households that receive SNAP benefits qualify through categorical eligibility.

Most of the 265,000 students who would lose their free lunches should qualify for reduced price lunches that would cost 40 cents each—still a steep cost for some families, especially those with several children, anti-hunger groups say.

“Even though copay doesn’t seem like a lot, it really does add up,” said Crystal FitzSimons, director of school and out-of-school time programs for the Food Research & Action Center. “We expect a lot of kids wouldn’t participate and lose free benefits.”

Under the farm bill, parents would also need to fill out forms showing they qualify for reduce-priced lunch. Students might need to bring the documents home to their parents and then return the completed forms to school. Just filling out the paperwork could prove a barrier to some families said Leslie Finnan, a senior legislative analyst for the School Superintendents Association.

“Some kids are going to miss out on the meal because they don’t bring the paperwork home or because parents don’t turn the paperwork in,” she said.

House Agriculture Chairman Mike Conaway (R-Texas) told Bloomberg Government said he didn’t share the worries about affordability. “Ninety-five percent of students still qualify for reduced lunches, which on this scale, by definition, we think their families can afford it,” Conaway said.

“Every dollar that we use to serve people who truly aren’t eligible by income and by asset test, that’s a dollar’s worth of food out of the mouth and stomachs of people who truly do need it,” Rep. Glenn Thompson (R-Pa.) told Bloomberg Government.

“It’s so important to me to get it where it needs to be,” said Thompson, an Agriculture Committee member.

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said the language currently in the bill to limit eligibility won’t impact those families most in need.

“I don’t see it causing widespread hardship,” he said. “The people truly in need will continue to receive this program.”

School districts are watching to see whether they might be hit by a side effect of the changes: a drop in the number of students eligible for free lunches that would result in those districts losing eligibility for a program meant to ease the stigma for meal program recipients.

Several years ago in Coffee County, Ga., teachers and staff saw students who would rather go hungry than risk getting picked on for having free or reduced price lunches, said Morris Leis, the superintendent of Coffee County Public Schools.

Some people “would not fill out the free and reduced lunch forms,” he said. “They’re poor, but they’re proud, and then their kids suffer. Or the parents are negligent.”

A federal program to combat that stigma, known as the Community Eligibility Provision, allows districts to offer all students, regardless of income, free meals. It was used by 20,721 schools serving more than 9.7 million kids in the 2016-17 school year, according to the Food Research and Action Center. Conservatives say if lawmakers truly want benefits to only go to those most in need, they should eliminate the Community Eligibility Provision entirely.

Georgia’s Burke County public schools five years ago became one of the more than 3,500 districts nationwide, by the Food and Research Action Center’s count, to use the Community Eligibility Provision. Of the rural county’s population of fewer than 23,000, one-quarter live below the poverty line, according to the Census Bureau.

While only sixty-three percent of students in the school district qualify for free lunches under SNAP, all students are provided free meals through the Community Eligibility Provision. Every day, the schools give students about 3,500 free lunches and 2,800 free breakfasts.

Donna S. Martin, the director of Burke County’s school nutrition program, said she’s watching the farm bill debate with concern. Currently, the district’s meal program is fully reimbursed for all students. If the percentage of eligible students drops a little lower, the program will only be partially reimbursed. With less funding, the food program will need to lower the quality of the food or reduce staff, Martin said.

“Education is no cost, busing is no cost, books are no cost,” she said. “All of that should be equal to lunch. I don’t see why that’s the only part of the day where the child has to pay.”

The fate of the House bill is murky, at best, following its floor defeat.

House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) has offered members the vote they demanded on Judiciary Chairman Bob Goodlatte’s (R-Va.) immigration bill (H.R. 4760). The measure would provide temporary and renewable status to undocumented immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as children. The immigrants, known as “Dreamers,” would not get a path to citizenship. Whether that offer will be enough to woo reluctant Republican immigration hardliners is unclear.

“I’m 100 percent confident that we will have some kind of a farm bill by September, whether it’s an extension of the existing policy or new policy, we will have that in place,” said Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), chairman of a group of conservative and libertarian House Republicans known as the House Freedom Caucus. Many in the Freedom Caucus voted to bring down the House farm bill.

So far, House Agriculture Committee members and leadership are not conceding an extension may be needed. Senate Agriculture leaders, meanwhile, are aiming to present a bipartisan farm bill in the coming weeks which is unlikely to contain deep SNAP cuts.

From her vantage point in eastern Georgia, Burke County's Martin said making sure kids are not only fed, but provided nutritious meals, leads to better attention in the classroom and fewer behavioral and health issues.

"A lot of my kids come to school just for the food," Martin said. "If that what gets them to come to school, I'm OK with that."