



The Education Trust
Closing the gaps in opportunity and
achievement, pre-K through college

July 31, 2020

Tennessee Congressional Delegation
United States Congress
Washington, D.C.

Dear Members of the Tennessee Congressional Delegation,

The Education Trust in Tennessee, along with our state partners, are grateful for the leadership that you have provided in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. As this virus continues to impact our state, a pressing and urgent issue remains at the forefront for our communities: hunger and food insecurity.

Prior to the start of COVID-19, over [260,000 Tennessee children—one in seven children—struggled with hunger](#). Unfortunately, the COVID-19 outbreak has caused that number to rapidly increase. Now [one in every four Tennessee children is at risk](#) of food insecurity. Food insecurity for children and youth of all ages is intolerable – and it is avoidable.

Investments made in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (H.R. 6201) have gone a long way to prevent hunger, but they are not enough given new and emerging data on the [current status of food insecurity for children](#), especially [for children of color](#), across the country.

The issue of food insecurity is particularly dire for Tennessee children who are eligible for the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer program (P-EBT) created in H.R. 6201. [Recent reports that Tennessee may forgo \\$60 million dollars](#) of federal food assistance because the state has failed to implement the P-EBT program with fidelity by conducting the necessary data matching and information gathering, as well as outreach and advocacy alongside schools and districts across the state threatens the very livelihoods of Tennessee children and their families.

As the undersigned organizations, we believe that federal and state leaders must do more in this moment of great need to increase access, availability, and flexibility of food assistance aid and programs. As Congress negotiates the fourth COVID-19 relief bill, we encourage lawmakers to do more to curb food insecurity for Tennessee students and families by:

- Extending the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) program through summer 2020 and into the next academic year to allow households with children receiving free or reduced-price school meals to access food purchasing dollars if the child's school has been closed for more than five consecutive days or if the school is operating with a hybrid or virtual model of instruction;
- Expanding P-EBT benefits for children under 5 years old;
- Ensuring no more laws are needed to extend the program should school closures or distance learning continue;
- Strengthening the program by supporting states and directing the USDA to work with state agencies to administer benefits quickly;

- Increasing the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) maximum monthly allotment by 15%;
- Raising the minimum monthly SNAP benefit from \$16 to \$30;
- Suspending administrative actions that would eliminate or weaken SNAP benefits or participation, including the Trump administration’s changes to categorical eligibility;
- Eliminating work requirements that bar college students from accessing critical SNAP benefits;
- Providing increased funding dedicated to outreach so more eligible families can receive SNAP, WIC, and other food aid; and
- Enabling online applications for a wide variety of food and poverty programs, as Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand and Rep. Joseph Morelle have proposed in the Health, Opportunity, and Personal Empowerment (HOPE) Act of 2020.

Thank you again for your leadership during this public health crisis. As Tennessee children begin the next school year (whether virtually, in-person, or some combination), it is paramount that they receive the critical nutritional supports which bolster retention, provide energy, and build a foundation for academic growth and success during this unprecedented time.

We would be happy to answer any questions about these priorities and would appreciate the opportunity to work with your staff on these issues.

Sincerely,

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CC: Senator Lamar Alexander; Senator Marsha Blackburn; Representative Phil Roe; Representative Tim Burchett; Representative Chuck Fleischmann; Representative Scott DesJarlais; Representative Jim Cooper; Representative John Rose; Representative Mark E. Green; Representative David Kustoff; Representative Steve Cohen