

119TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

S. _____

To amend the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act to authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to make grants to certain institutions of higher education to provide free meals to low-income students, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

Mr. SCHIFF (for himself and Mr. WELCH) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on _____

A BILL

To amend the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act to authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to make grants to certain institutions of higher education to provide free meals to low-income students, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Food for Thought Act
5 of 2026”.

1 **SEC. 2. FREE MEALS FOR LOW-INCOME COLLEGE STU-**
2 **DENTS.**

3 Section 18 of the Richard B. Russell National School
4 Lunch Act (42 U.S.C. 1769) is amended by inserting be-
5 fore subsection (b) the following:

6 “(a) **FREE MEALS FOR LOW-INCOME COLLEGE STU-**
7 **DENTS.**—

8 “(1) **DEFINITIONS.**—In this subsection:

9 “(A) **COMMUNITY COLLEGE.**—The term
10 ‘community college’ means—

11 “(i) a public institution of higher edu-
12 cation at which the highest degree that is
13 predominantly awarded to students is an
14 associate degree, including Tribal Colleges
15 or Universities receiving grants under sec-
16 tion 316 of the Higher Education Act of
17 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1059c) that offer a 2-
18 year program for completion of such de-
19 gree and State public institutions of higher
20 education that offer such a 2-year pro-
21 gram; and

22 “(ii) a public postsecondary vocational
23 institution (as defined in section 102(c) of
24 the Higher Education Act of 1965 (20
25 U.S.C. 1002(c))).

26 “(B) **ELIGIBLE ENTITY.**—

1 “(i) IN GENERAL.—The term ‘eligible
2 entity’ means—

3 “(I) an eligible institution of
4 higher education that has an on-cam-
5 pus meal program;

6 “(II) an institutionally operated
7 food service, contracted prepared-meal
8 provider, mobile meal distribution,
9 food hub, food pantry, food hall, or
10 community-based meal partnership, as
11 determined by the Secretary; or

12 “(III) a consortium of eligible in-
13 stitutions of higher education, of
14 which at least 1 eligible institution of
15 higher education—

16 “(aa) has an on-campus
17 meal program; and

18 “(bb) is geographically ac-
19 cessible to the students of each
20 eligible institution of higher edu-
21 cation in the consortium that
22 does not have an on-campus meal
23 program.

24 “(ii) GEOGRAPHIC ACCESSIBILITY.—
25 For purposes of clause (i)(III)(bb), geo-

1 graphic accessibility shall be based on the
2 location of, the availability of public transit
3 to, and the meal service hours of each eli-
4 gible institution of higher education within
5 the consortium.

6 “(C) ELIGIBLE INSTITUTION OF HIGHER
7 EDUCATION.—The term ‘eligible institution of
8 higher education’ means an institution of higher
9 education (as defined in sections 101 and
10 102(a)(1)(B) of the Higher Education Act of
11 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1001, 1002(a)(1)(B))), includ-
12 ing a minority-serving institution, in which at
13 least 20 percent of the undergraduate students
14 enrolled are eligible to receive a Federal Pell
15 Grant under subpart 1 of part A of title IV of
16 that Act (20 U.S.C. 1070a et seq.).

17 “(D) HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGE OR
18 UNIVERSITY.—The term ‘historically Black col-
19 lege or university’ has the meaning given the
20 term ‘part B institution’ in section 322 of the
21 Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C.
22 1061).

23 “(E) MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTION.—
24 The term ‘minority-serving institution’ means
25 an institution described in paragraphs (1)

1 through (7) of section 371(a) of the Higher
2 Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1067q(a)).

3 “(F) ON-CAMPUS MEAL PROGRAM.—The
4 term ‘on-campus meal program’ means a meal
5 program on the campus of an eligible institu-
6 tion of higher education that is provided
7 through an institutionally owned or operated
8 food service or 1 or more third-party food serv-
9 ice vendors.

10 “(G) PROGRAM.—The term ‘program’
11 means the program established under para-
12 graph (2)(A).

13 “(H) TRIBAL COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY.—
14 The term ‘Tribal college or university’ means a
15 Tribal College or University (as defined in sec-
16 tion 316(b) of the Higher Education Act of
17 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1059c(b)) that is chartered by
18 the governing body of the applicable Indian
19 Tribe or by the Federal Government.

20 “(2) ESTABLISHMENT.—

21 “(A) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary, acting
22 through the Administrator of the Food and Nu-
23 trition Service, shall establish a program under
24 which the Secretary shall award grants, on a
25 competitive basis, to eligible institutions of

1 higher education to provide free meals, includ-
2 ing snacks, to low-income students.

3 “(B) DURATION OF GRANT.—The duration
4 of a grant awarded under the program shall not
5 exceed 2 years.

6 “(3) APPLICATION.—To be eligible to receive a
7 grant under the program, an eligible entity shall
8 submit to the Secretary an application at such time,
9 in such manner, and containing such information as
10 the Secretary may require, including—

11 “(A) a plan for identifying and conducting
12 outreach to low-income students; and

13 “(B) an assurance that the eligible entity
14 will—

15 “(i) conduct outreach to students with
16 respect to the program, encourage student
17 participation in the program, and inform
18 students of—

19 “(I) their potential eligibility for
20 participation in other Federal, State,
21 and local benefit and support pro-
22 grams, including means-tested Fed-
23 eral benefits programs, such as the
24 supplemental nutrition assistance pro-
25 gram established under the Food and

1 Nutrition Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C. 2011
2 et seq.); and

3 “(II) the processes for obtaining
4 more information, confirming eligi-
5 bility, and accessing benefits under
6 those programs;

7 “(ii) evaluate institutional policies re-
8 lating to the purchase of meal plans under
9 on-campus meal programs and whether
10 those policies create barriers to enrollment
11 and persistence for low-income students;

12 “(iii) identify ways to mitigate any
13 barriers under institutional policies that
14 are found, through the evaluation de-
15 scribed in clause (ii), to create barriers de-
16 scribed in that clause; and

17 “(iv) in the case of an eligible entity
18 that is a consortium of eligible institutions
19 of higher education that includes 1 or more
20 eligible institutions of higher education
21 that do not have an on-campus meal pro-
22 gram, provide an explanation with respect
23 to how the eligible entity will ensure that
24 low-income students attending those insti-
25 tutions of higher education that do not

1 have an on-campus meal program will be
2 notified of available free meals provided
3 under the program and available transpor-
4 tation options to be able to easily access
5 those free meals.

6 “(4) AWARD ADMINISTRATION.—

7 “(A) IN GENERAL.—In awarding grants
8 under the program, the Secretary shall ensure
9 that the eligible entities receiving grants re-
10 flect—

11 “(i) varying student body size;

12 “(ii) part-time and full-time student
13 enrollment;

“(iii) diverse geographic locations and regional costs of living, including urban, rural, or suburban campuses; and

“(iv) diverse residential character, including race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

20 “(B) PRIORITY.—In awarding grants
21 under the program, the Secretary may give pri-
22 ority to eligible entities—

23 “(i) with prepared food infrastructure
24 or that can identify an outside source of
25 support to develop that infrastructure;

1 “(ii) that are community colleges, his-
2 torically Black colleges and universities,
3 Tribal colleges and universities, Hispanic-
4 serving institutions (as defined in section
5 502(a) of the Higher Education Act of
6 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1101a(a))), or other mi-
7 nority-serving institutions or consortia of
8 minority-serving institutions; or

9 “(iii) that are located within proximity
10 of a school that elects to receive special as-
11 sistance payments under section
12 11(a)(1)(F).

13 “(5) USE OF FUNDS.—

14 “(A) IN GENERAL.—An eligible entity that
15 receives a grant under the program shall use
16 the grant—

17 “(i) to establish a program to provide
18 free meals, including snacks, to low-income
19 students, subject to the condition that the
20 eligible entity shall provide not fewer than
21 1 and not more than 10 free meals per
22 week per student;

23 “(ii) to conduct outreach to students
24 to encourage participation in the program;

1 “(iii) to prepare meals to be provided
2 for free under the program;

3 “(iv) to purchase meals from vendors
4 to be provided for free under the program;

5 “(v) to provide information to stu-
6 dents regarding potential eligibility for as-
7 sistance under Federal, State, and local
8 benefit and support programs and the
9 processes for obtaining more information,
10 as described in paragraph (3)(B)(i);

11 “(vi) to conduct evaluations of institu-
12 tional policies described in paragraph
13 (3)(B)(ii);

14 “(vii) to identify ways to mitigate bar-
15 riers described in paragraph (3)(B)(iii);
16 and

17 “(viii) to provide an explanation de-
18 scribed in paragraph (3)(B)(iv).

19 “(B) PRIORITY.—In selecting low-income
20 students to participate in the program estab-
21 lished by the eligible entity under subparagraph
22 (A)(i), an eligible entity shall give priority to
23 low-income students who—

24 “(i) receive a Federal Pell Grant
25 under subpart 1 of part A of title IV of the

1 Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C.
2 1070a et seq.);

3 “(ii) indicate that they are experi-
4 encing or at risk of experiencing food inse-
5 curity, housing insecurity, homelessness, or
6 other insecurity with respect to basic
7 needs; or

8 “(iii) participate in a State or feder-
9 ally financed work-study program during
10 the regular school year, as determined by
11 the eligible institution of higher education.

12 “(C) LIMITATION ON PURCHASE OF EQUIP-
13 MENT.—An eligible entity that receives a grant
14 under the program may use not more than 20
15 percent of the grant to purchase equipment.

16 “(D) ELIGIBILITY FOR SNAP.—Receipt of
17 a meal under the program shall not be consid-
18 ered for the purposes of determining eligibility
19 for the supplemental nutrition assistance pro-
20 gram established under the Food and Nutrition
21 Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C. 2011 et seq.).

22 “(6) REQUIREMENT.—Meals served by an eligi-
23 ble entity using a grant under the program shall
24 meet the nutritional requirements developed under
25 paragraph (9)(C).

“(7) REPORT.—Each eligible entity that receives a grant under the program shall, not later than 1 year after the end of the grant term, submit to the Secretary a report containing—

“(A) a description of the prevalence of food insecurity among students enrolled in the eligible entity;

8 “(B) an evaluation of the use of the grant
9 funds by the eligible entity, including—

10 “(i) in addressing challenges with food
11 insecurity; and

“(ii) with respect to the degree completion rates of students served by the eligible entity; and

15 “(C) information on the population of stu-
16 dents served by the grant funds, disaggregated
17 by—

18 “(i) part-time or full-time status;

19 “(ii) eligibility to receive the Federal
20 Pell Grant under subpart 1 of part A of
21 title IV of the Higher Education Act of
22 1965 (20 U.S.C. 1070a et seq.);

23 “(iii) estimates of eligibility to receive
24 benefits under the supplemental nutrition
25 assistance program established under the

1 Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C.
2 2011 et seq.); and

3 “(iv) dependency status.

4 “(8) DUTIES OF THE SECRETARY.—

5 “(A) CONSULTATION.—In carrying out the
6 program, the Secretary shall consult with eligi-
7 ble entities and State social service agencies.

8 “(B) TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE.—

9 “(i) IN GENERAL.—Not later than
10 120 days after the date of enactment of
11 the Food for Thought Act of 2026, the
12 Secretary, acting through the Adminis-
13 trator of the Food and Nutrition Service,
14 and the Secretary of Education shall enter
15 into a memorandum of understanding
16 that—

17 “(I) authorizes the regular shar-
18 ing of Department of Education data
19 and resources to assist with identi-
20 fying eligible institutions of higher
21 education and low-income students;

22 “(II) contains a plan to assist
23 State social services agencies and
24 State higher education agencies in im-
25 proving outreach to students eligible

1 to enroll in the supplemental nutrition
2 assistance program established under
3 the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008
4 (7 U.S.C. 2011 et seq.); and

5 “(III) requires the development
6 of an annual plan for the Adminis-
7 trator of the Food and Nutrition
8 Service and the Secretary of Edu-
9 cation to provide technical assistance,
10 as applicable, to eligible entities—

11 “(aa) to develop prepared-
12 meal infrastructure;

13 “(bb) to carry out the activi-
14 ties described in paragraph
15 (5)(A), including training the
16 employees of the eligible entity to
17 carry out those activities; and

18 “(cc) to develop outreach to
19 students who are likely to be eli-
20 gible for benefits under the sup-
21 plemental nutrition assistance
22 program established under the
23 Food and Nutrition Act of 2008
24 (7 U.S.C. 2011 et seq.).

1 “(ii) DATA PRIVACY.—Data sharing
2 pursuant to the memorandum of under-
3 standing under clause (i) shall—

4 “(I) comply with all applicable
5 Federal privacy protections, including
6 section 444 of the General Education
7 Provisions Act (20 U.S.C. 1232g)
8 (commonly known as the ‘Family
9 Educational Rights and Privacy Act
10 of 1974’); and

11 “(II) be used only for the pur-
12 pose of assisting eligible institutions
13 of higher education in conducting out-
14 reach to low-income students.

15 “(C) NUTRITIONAL REQUIREMENTS.—Not
16 later than 120 days after the date of enactment
17 of the Food for Thought Act of 2026, the Sec-
18 retary shall develop nutritional requirements for
19 meals served pursuant to grants under the pro-
20 gram that are consistent with the goals of the
21 most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans
22 published under section 301 of the National
23 Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Act
24 of 1990 (7 U.S.C. 5341).

25 “(D) REPORT.—

1 “(i) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary
2 shall submit to Congress—

3 “(I) not later than 2 years after
4 the date of enactment of the Food for
5 Thought Act of 2026, a report evalu-
6 ating the program, including—

7 “(aa) how the program ad-
8 dressed food insecurity; and

9 “(bb) recommendations with
10 respect to expanding the pro-
11 gram; and

12 “(II) not later than 4 years after
13 the date of enactment of the Food for
14 Thought Act of 2026, a report on the
15 effect of the program on retention and
16 completion rates for low-income stu-
17 dents served by the program.

18 “(ii) DISAGGREGATION.—Information
19 contained in the reports submitted under
20 clause (i) shall be disaggregated, where
21 possible, by—

22 “(I) sectors and types of institu-
23 tions of higher education, including
24 whether an institution of higher edu-

1 cation is a minority-serving institu-
2 tion;

3 “(II) the number of eligible stu-
4 dents who—

5 “(aa) are part-time, half-
6 time, or full-time;

7 “(bb) are eligible to receive
8 the Federal Pell Grant under
9 subpart 1 of part A of title IV of
10 that Act (20 U.S.C. 1070a et
11 seq.);

12 “(cc) are eligible to receive
13 benefits under the supplemental
14 nutrition assistance program es-
15 tablished under the Food and
16 Nutrition Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C.
17 2011 et seq.);

18 “(dd) have indicated that
19 the student or a member of the
20 family of the student previously
21 received benefits under—

22 “(AA) the program de-
23 scribed in item (cc); or

24 “(BB) the temporary
25 assistance for needy families

1 program established under
2 part A of title IV of the So-
3 cial Security Act (42 U.S.C.
4 601 et seq.);

5 “(ee)(AA) reside in an insti-
6 tution or boarding house; or

7 “(BB) live with other indi-
8 viduals and pay compensation to
9 those individuals for meals; and

10 “(ff) are first-generation col-
11 lege students; and

12 “(III) whether an institution of
13 higher education has an open admis-
14 sions policy.

15 “(9) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—
16 There are authorized to be appropriated to carry out
17 this subsection such sums as are necessary for each
18 of fiscal years 2027 through 2032.”.

19 **SEC. 3. AMENDMENT TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION ACT OF**
20 **1965.**

21 Section 480(i) of the Higher Education Act of 1965
22 (20 U.S.C. 1087vv(i)) is amended by adding at the end
23 the following:

24 “(6) Notwithstanding paragraph (1), benefits
25 received under subsection (a) of section 18 of the

1 Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (42
2 U.S.C. 1769) shall not be treated as other financial
3 assistance for purposes of section 471(3).”.