



Nourishing Today
Sustaining Tomorrow

Blueprint for Building Statewide Protein-Focused Child Nutrition Programs



Case Study: Beef Sticks for Backpacks & Beefing Up Backpacks

Introduction

Every weekend, 1 in 7 children in the U.S. faces hunger when school meals aren't available.¹ Weekend backpack programs step in to fill the gap by sending children home on Fridays with food they can rely on until Monday.

The programs *Beefing Up Backpacks* (Pennsylvania) and *Beef Sticks for Backpacks* (Colorado) offer an innovative, protein-focused twist: individually wrapped, shelf-stable beef sticks added to backpacks. These snacks are safe, kid-friendly, and protein-rich—helping children grow, learn, and thrive. At the same time, they connect local beef producers, processors, and community partners in a powerful collaboration that strengthens both families and agriculture.

This blueprint shares how states can replicate and scale this model, while highlighting the broader goals of the [Protein PACT](#): advancing nutrition security, sustainability, and trust across the animal protein supply chain.

Step 1: Understand the Need

Weekend hunger is different from weekday hunger: while many children access free or reduced-price school meals during the week, those meals stop on Friday. A needs assessment helps identify:

- Where children face the greatest weekend food insecurity.
- Which schools and food banks already have backpack programs.
- The meal and nutrition gaps that protein-rich foods can help fill.

Quick Fact: In some counties, over 60% of students qualify for free/reduced lunch, yet weekend programs reach only a fraction of them.²

Step 2: Build Partnerships

These programs succeed because of broad coalitions. Partners can include:

- Beef councils, producer groups, and local processors.
- Universities with USDA-inspected meat labs.
- Food banks and nonprofits focused on child hunger.
- Policymakers, educators, and local businesses.
- Independent regional/state meat packers to connect with.

Example: In Colorado, donated beef trim is processed at Colorado State University's meat lab, packaged into beef sticks, and distributed through food banks. The model creates shared ownership and long-term sustainability.

Step 3: Design the Program

The program works by producing shelf-stable beef sticks—individually packaged, tamper-proof, and kid-friendly—for inclusion in weekend backpacks.

KEY DESIGN ELEMENTS

- **Product:** 1 oz. beef stick, allergen-conscious seasoning.
- **Source:** Beef trim processed at universities or regional facilities.
- **Packaging:** Safe, USDA-compliant, easy to open, child-friendly branding.
- **Distribution:** Use existing food bank logistics; start small and scale up.

Why Beef Sticks?

- Shelf-stable, no refrigeration required.
- Portable and kid-friendly.
- High in protein for healthy growth.
- Culturally, beef is broadly recognized as an acceptable staple protein



Step 4: Track and Measure Impact

To sustain donor support and grow programs, it's essential to capture outcomes:

- Pounds of beef distributed.
- Children served by county.
- Cost per unit delivered.
- Feedback from teachers, parents, and children.

Impact Snapshot: A \$10,000 pilot program can provide up to 50,000 beef sticks—enough to supply more than 1,000 children for an entire school year.

Step 5: Fund the Program

Diversified funding makes programs sustainable:

- Industry support (Beef Checkoff, processors, suppliers).
- Grants from state agencies or foundations.
- Local businesses and community donations.
- In-kind contributions (spices, casings, packaging materials).

Funding Model: Cost per beef stick ranges from \$0.14–\$0.77, making sponsorships impactful even at modest levels.

Step 6: Educate & Engage

Programs aren't just about food—they're about raising awareness.

- Share the role of protein in learning and growth.
- Involve students, university partners, and local producers in storytelling.
- Recognize sponsors through a "Protein Partners" spotlight.

Tools: Social media toolkits, classroom materials, annual impact reports.

Step 7: Plan for the Future

To grow and endure, programs should connect to state and federal frameworks:

- Advocate for inclusion in USDA meal programs.
- Explore Summer EBT and SNAP-Ed alignment.
- Build advisory boards with educators, producers, and policymakers.
- Share toolkits across states to inspire replication in pork, poultry, dairy, and other protein sectors.

Conclusion

Beef sticks in backpacks may sound simple, but the impact is profound: children get the protein they need to thrive, and agricultural communities build stronger ties with the families they feed.

This case study demonstrates a replicable, cross-sector model that embodies the goals of the **Protein PACT**: advancing nutrition security, fostering public-private partnerships, and showing how protein can be part of the solution to hunger.

Call to Action: If you're a producer, processor, nonprofit, or policymaker, consider how your sector can adapt this model to bring protein security to children in your state—one backpack at a time.

¹Facts about Child Hunger, Feeding America, <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/child-hunger-facts>

²National Center for Education Statistics, Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch, U.S. Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=898>