



CONGRESS

Republican congressman suggests some children receiving free school lunches should work at McDonald's instead

Rep. Rich McCormick of Georgia said the freeze on federal aid would allow the government to review all programs, including ones that provide free school lunches to low-income children.

Rep. Rich McCormick, a R-Ga., at the U.S. Capitol on Dec. 20, 2024.

Rep. Rich McCormick, R-Ga., at the U.S. Capitol on Dec. 20. Valerie Plesch/Bloomberg via Getty Images file



By Rebecca Shabad

Rep. Rich McCormick, R-Ga., on Tuesday defended the impacts of the White House's federal aid freeze on school lunch programs by suggesting that some children should be working instead of receiving free lunch.

During an interview on CNN, McCormick praised the move as a way to broadly re-evaluate how the government allocates funding. CNN anchor Pamela Brown noted that Head Start, which helps provide nutritional assistance to low-income children and families, is one of the programs that could be affected. She pressed McCormick on whether he would support cutting funding for free breakfast and lunches.

"Before I was even 13 years old, I was picking berries in the field, before child labor laws that precluded that. I was a paper boy, and when I was in high school, I worked my entire way through," McCormick said. "You're telling me that kids who stay at home instead of going to work at Burger King, McDonald's, during the summer, should stay at home and get their free lunch instead of going to work? I think we need to have a top-down review."

McCormick, who was speaking from Doral, Florida, where House Republicans are holding their annual issues conference, said that the pause on federal funds gives the government a chance to "see where is the money really being spent."

"Who can actually go and actually produce their own income? Who can actually go out there and do something that makes them have value and work skills for the future?" McCormick said.

He added, "I mean, how many people got their start in fast-food restaurants when they were kids, versus just giving a blanket rule that gives all kids lunches in high school who are capable of going out and actually getting a job and doing something that makes them have value, thinking about their future instead of thinking about how they're going to sponge out the government when they don't need to."

Acting White House Office of Management and Budget Director Matthew J. Vaeth said in a memo Monday to federal departments and agencies that by Tuesday at 5 p.m., they must "temporarily pause all activities related to obligation or disbursement of all Federal financial assistance, and other relevant agency activities that may be implicated by the executive orders" signed by President Donald Trump in the last week.

The memo indicated that the freeze wouldn't affect Medicare or Social Security benefits or government assistance provided directly to individuals.

A longer document sent to federal agencies and obtained by NBC News requested details on thousands of programs that provide

financial assistance. School meals for low-income students were among the programs on the list.

McCormick said that the government doesn't give people the ability to "dig themselves out" and instead "penalize them for actually working and actually keep them on welfare."

"We need to have a top-down review so we can get people out of poverty," he said, adding that Americans are losing their way because the government gives "people incentives to stay home and not work."


The congressman also referred during the interview to Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Trump's nominee to lead the Department of Health and Human Services.

"When you talk about producing not just calories, but nutrition, that's what JFK Jr. is all about," he said, accidentally referring to the Health Secretary nominee as his late cousin.

"When in history — and this is a really good question for any reporter — when in history, have we had our poorest people also be our fattest people?" he asked. "That's for the first time here in America. Traditionally, our poorest people live very skinny and very under-nutrition."

McCormick's office and the White House didn't immediately respond to requests for comment. NBC News also reached out to the Agriculture Department's Food and Nutrition Service, which oversees the National School Lunch Program.

According to a program fact sheet, children can qualify for free school lunches under certain criteria, including if they participate in other federal programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, "or based on their status as a homeless, migrant, runaway, or foster child."

Kids also enrolled in Head Start or a similar state-funded pre-K program are eligible for free meals. In addition, it says, "Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the Federal poverty level are eligible for reduced price meals." 



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