



March 12, 2007

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chair
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
Senate Russell Building, Room 328-A
Washington, DC 20510

The Society for Nutrition Education (SNE) is pleased to submit the following statement for the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee record for the hearing on “Child Nutrition and the School Setting.” As the Committee begins work on critical issues in the 110th Congress, you and your colleagues have the opportunity to protect and enhance the health of children through school food programs which provide food and educate America’s children for living healthful lives.

SNE believes school food programs – the school breakfast program, school lunch program, after school food program, summer food program, and the fruit and vegetable snack program are all critical in providing food for children in public and private schools in America. These programs are especially important for children from low income families for whom school food is often a very large percentage of the food they will eat in the day.

All of these important school food programs are operating in the midst of increasing concern about childhood obesity and related health issues from diabetes to high blood pressure once found only in adults, but now found ever more frequently in children. This has led experts to predict that children born today will live lives shorter than their parents for the first time in recorded history. These health issues can be partially explained by the eating habits of children. For example, US Department of Agriculture (USDA) research has shown that only 2% of children meet all of the recommended servings in the USDA’s MyPyramid.

Schools participating in the school food programs, however, are required by USDA to serve meals that meet the standards established by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. USDA studies find that school lunch participants consume less sugar, soft drinks, and sweetened fruit drinks; consume more milk and vegetables; and have higher intake of many key vitamins and nutrients than do non-participants. The meals eaten in a school cafeteria comprise anywhere from 19-50% of students’ total daily caloric intake during a school day.

Unfortunately, children also consume foods at school from sources such as vending machines which compete with the school food programs (thus the term competitive foods). These foods are generally of minimal nutritional value. USDA has reported these competitive foods have an impact. They:

- influence diet-related health risks;
- stigmatize participation in school meal programs;

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- decrease viability of school meal programs; and
- convey a mixed message about nutrition and health.

Other studies have shown competitive foods:

- 1) are often high in fat, sodium, and added sugar;
- 2) displace student consumption of more nutritious foods; and
- 3) cause a negative relationship between revenue from competitive foods and school lunch participation.

A new report from the University of California shows results from studies on the effect of California's competitive food standards. The studies indicate that nutrition standards for school foods and beverages not only improve the quality of the individual foods and beverages sold to students but also result in a shift in student purchases away from snack foods toward complete meals. Nutrition standards have a double benefit: not only do students eat healthier foods but school food service can actually increase their revenues.

All of these issues in child nutrition are of great concern to SNE as an international organization of nutrition education professionals who conduct research in education, behavior, and communication; develop and disseminate innovative nutrition education strategies; and communicate information on food, nutrition, and health issues to students, professionals, policy makers, and the public. SNE is prepared to work with you and the members of the Committee to address children's health issues through public policies that support effective nutrition education in a health-promoting environment for children.

The Child Nutrition Promotion & School Lunch Protection Act

Promoting child nutrition in schools was an obvious choice in 1946, as it is now. Students have the opportunity to eat a significant portion of their daily dietary intake at school. Schools are an appropriate setting for teaching children important health lessons, including how to adopt and maintain a healthy, active lifestyle. The non-verbal lessons, i.e. the foods that are available in the school and school activities, are more effective than the verbal lessons, because they present children with the foods to eat, not the theory of what to eat. With this didactic and experiential learning, well-nourished, physically active students exhibit improved academic and athletic performances, better test scores, improved attendance, lower incidence of illness, support of healthy lifestyle behaviors, better student behavior, and increased attention and creativity.

SNE supports the Child Nutrition Promotion & School Lunch Protection Act. We believe this Act is necessary to provide the Secretary of Agriculture the authority to consider and implement recommendations made by authoritative scientific organizations concerning appropriate nutritional guidelines for foods sold in schools participating in school food programs.

SNE recommends that this legislation:

- Cover all foods sold in schools including a la carte lines, vending machines, and school snack bars;
- Encompass all foods made available on school grounds;

- Apply to the entire school day;
- Support fundraisers that promote that sale of fruits and vegetables or other efforts that are in line with a healthy lifestyle; and
- Promote and incorporate local wellness policy initiatives with school food programs.

This Act makes exceptions for school parties and classroom celebrations, as well as provides exemptions for school fundraisers. SNE, however, is cautious to support exceptions and exemptions that encourage eating patterns that could potentially teach children unhealthy eating habits. For example, rewarding children with food has been shown to have negative dietary repercussions.

The Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program

In operation for the last four years in several states, the Fruit and Vegetable Program (FVP) has shown success in increasing children's intake of fruits and vegetables resulting in healthier eating habits for a lifetime. In 2002-2003, schools provided fresh and dried fruits and fresh vegetables to all students at no cost at 25 pilot schools in Indiana, Iowa, Ohio, and Michigan and the Zuni Indian Tribal Reservation in New Mexico.

The success and political support for the program led to Congress converting the FVP from a pilot program to a permanent program in The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act with an expansion in 2004 to 8 states and 3 Indian Tribal Organizations. In 2005-2006, Congress again appropriated funds to expand the FVP to include a total of 14 states. The states currently participating include: Connecticut, Idaho, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin, along with the original four: Indiana, Iowa, Ohio, and Michigan. SNE is proud of the success and political support the FVP receives, as we have been a player supporting the program from the very start.

SNE currently recommends:

- Expansion of the FVP to all 50 states;
- Increase fresh, regionally-grown foods in the FVP through pilot projects that focus on local strategies that build stronger connections between local farmers (new, transitioning, immigrant, small and mid-sized) and schools.
- Requirement of a Farm-to-School coordinator in each state that has FVP projects to work directly with schools, state department of education, state department of agriculture, local farm groups, cooperatives, and food policy councils.
- Provision of technical assistance and incentives (e.g., on-farm entrepreneurship, micro-credit, or development of infrastructure such as farmer cooperatives) to farmers (new, transitioning, immigrant, small and mid-sized) to support the increased demand for fresh fruits and vegetables for the FVP. Also important:

- Regionally-produced food must be sustainably-raised with little or no pesticides, herbicides or fungicides in an effort to decrease pesticide exposure to children, with a preference for organically-grown fruits and vegetables.
- Assistance for farmers and/or schools for increased labor costs with processing regionally-produced food (small scale processing).
- Provision of technical assistance to schools to increase percentage of regionally-grown products purchased as part of the FVP.
 - Schools that provide regionally-produced food would integrate nutrition education in the curriculum including learning more about the farms in which the food is grown.
- Research for a strong evaluation component of FVP to look at health status of students, local economic factors, community indicators, etc.

SNE thanks the Committee for their work in promoting child nutrition in schools. SNE also appreciates this opportunity to share its expertise in this critical endeavor.

Sincerely,



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