

Senate Agriculture Committee

Written Testimony

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The educational system is a bedrock for our society in terms of providing children a sense of consistency, belonging, and care while growing their intellect in preparation for a productive life. COVID-19 highlighted the importance of that system and demonstrated to us that we had taken it for granted as a society. One of the most critical pieces of our educational system are the meals available to students during the school day. As schools were shuttered in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus, school food service showed up to assure that children would not go hungry while school was closed.

In Michigan, we served over 65 million meals and snacks from March through June 2020 at over 2,000 sites across our great state. We chose to participate in every COVID-19 waiver offered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in order to assure that no child would have to miss out on a meal during this difficult time. We also chose to strictly interpret the meal pattern waiver and allow for its use only during times of supply chain interruption. The waiver itself waived the requirements to serve meals that met the meal pattern requirements during the COVID-19 emergency. Our goal was to protect the integrity of the program, provide the most nutritious meals possible, and maintain the consistency of school meals for the children during a very stressful time. We believe strongly that children need to be provided the opportunity to eat healthy food and the adults are responsible for rising to that challenge. As a result, we did not want to see meals served that were not consistent with those goals, therefore we only granted the meal pattern waiver on a case-by-case basis when a specific component did not arrive as ordered to meet the meal pattern. While challenging, we heard from many local food service directors that they were thankful for the consistency and integrity as it helped in training of staff and meeting expectations of the families they were serving. We also heard from many families that continuing to receive nutritious school meals not only helped feed their children but provided them with a sense of stability when they needed it most.

As we begin to transition back to a new and hopefully better normal, I am most concerned about the children we did not reach, we still are not reaching, and the potential of never reaching those children again. Michigan saw a 20% decline in school enrollment in the fall of 2020. Some were students who would have entered kindergarten while others were students whose families did not re-enroll them in a public school. All are students who will not have access to meals at school once when their school returns to face-to-face learning. While we are doing better than most midwestern states, our meal counts are still down nearly 12% since March 2020 compared to the same time period in 2019. Families who have never needed to know or understand the emergency food system are struggling to navigate different social service agencies and qualifications for assistance. Childhood hunger has risen most dramatically in the most affluent areas of our country and those who want to help are simply tired from being called upon for such an extended period of time. Even though schools are providing meals for pick up, many families are not aware of that resource, instead they are waiting for additional food from the local food bank and/or food assistance benefits to feed their families as those are the programs that receive the most media attention and are looked to first during times of need.

As schools begin to reopen and we are faced with the expiration of critical USDA waivers that allowed us to reach children in all areas of our state, we believe school nutrition programs will experience an even greater financial decline whether those waivers expire in the fall of 2021 or the fall of 2022. By returning to free/reduced/paid meals, we worry that families will not understand the change nor will they be forgiving of the circumstances for the change. Affluent districts who traditionally have relied on a la carte sales to make up for the lack of revenue from meals served at the free reimbursement rate will likely see that revenue drop and unpaid meal debt soar as families cannot or will not easily return to sending money to school for food. With the number of families struggling who have not experienced chronic poverty, we believe the stigma of applying for free or reduced-price meals will keep even more families from seeking the assistance they need for their children. In addition to the stigma and rising levels of unpaid meal debt, local school nutrition programs will see a decrease in reimbursement with the change in programs and a substantial increase in paperwork for both the program staff and for parents. With the expiration of the area eligibility waiver which allowed all local districts to provide food in an equitable manner in the same way textbooks are provided, schools will be forced to return to the traditional National School Lunch Program with a lower reimbursement rate and significantly more paperwork. As the meal pattern waiver expires, if the food supply chain challenges have not rectified themselves by that time, we likely will see noncompliance with the much stricter meal pattern resulting in even greater financial loss at the local level as meals will be required to be disallowed during administrative reviews conducted by the state

agency per regulation. All an unintended snowball effect on the quality of the meal programs provided to children at school as we recover from the pandemic.

Children should not have to shoulder the burden of wondering if they are going to be able to eat at school. As the adults who are responsible for those children, we must provide every tool available to us to safeguard their future success including nutritious meals. We know that the child is most successful in academics the closer they have eaten to the test. As a result, we must provide a healthy breakfast at school in a manner which reduces stigma and increases the opportunities for children to participate, and not just on the day of the test but every day in which learning is a critical part of their day. In Michigan, 8 of every 10 students that qualify for free or reduced-price meals were eating breakfast at school daily prior to the pandemic. However, over 70,000 students do not even have access to breakfast at school because their school does not even offer the school breakfast program. In talking with a local superintendent recently, he told me that the number of children in his district that qualify for free or reduced-price meals was not high enough for him to even offer the program. He has over 1,000 students in his district that qualify. That is over 1,000 students that have no opportunity to eat breakfast at school and that does not even take into account the additional children whose families are too ashamed to apply or whose income are just above the threshold to qualify. Nor does it take into account the children whose families do not know or understand the importance of a healthy breakfast and therefore does not prioritize that for their children.

Children also should not have to shoulder the burden of wondering if they are going to eat when school is not in session. Whether it be the weekends, school breaks, a natural disaster, or the summer months, we should have a child nutrition program that can be immediately responsive and provide healthy meals where children are at. The COVID-19 waivers allowed for non-congregate feeding and meal pick up by parents/guardians and were critical to meeting this need for millions of children nationwide. However, we must continue to find ways to keep these efforts consistent in order to build trust and engagement with families. Michigan is thrilled to continue our work with the Summer Electronic Benefits to Children program (SEBTC) as we have specifically focused those benefits for children who have the least access to the Summer Food Service Program. However, annual changes to programs such as SEBTC cause a drop in trust that the program will be there as a safety net for families when in need. Participation in the summer program continues to plague every state and lessons learned from non-congregate meals and parent pick up during the pandemic can and should guide a future revamp of that program. In Michigan, we realized a 163% increase in meals served in July 2020 compared to meals in July 2019 and yet we know there are children who still did not have reliable access to those meals. As families try to regain some sense of

normal, go back to work, get caught up on rent and other payments, we must continue to be that glue for our children. Mental health and child hunger are realities of the pandemic that we can and should be addressing now and continue that support for years after the pandemic officially ends.

I believe that trust is a significant factor in a parent's choice to be engaged with their school community, including the completion of an application for free or reduced-price meals, or paying to eat the meals at school. As we begin our transition out of the pandemic, Michigan will be focusing on ways to continue to build or regain that trust. We want and need everyone to feel invested back into these programs in order for these programs to be successful. We cannot assume that parents or even school administrators understand the change in programs, the change in paperwork, or the reason for such changes. In Michigan, we believe the strongest reason to return to the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs is the impact these programs have on teaching life-long healthy eating habits to our future generations. The strong nutrition standards are second to none and critical for introducing and maintaining access to healthy food for our children. Our meal participation was just starting to pick back up after the significant changes that occurred in the last Child Nutrition Reauthorization and we were seeing greater student acceptance of the healthier foods including a variety of fruits and vegetables. Some short-term flexibilities offered on meal standards were critical for that transition. I would much rather see a child drink 1% chocolate milk than to throw away the skim chocolate milk. I would rather see a child eat a breakfast that includes potatoes some days than a child skip breakfast entirely because they do not like the food provided. That said, we can make healthy meals that are delicious! It does not have to be either/or. Progress happens in steps, but we have to keep moving forward. As adults we know the difficulty with eating healthy ourselves, yet we also know we must continue to provide the best environment for our children to learn and do better. If we focus on continuous improvement, the industry and the preferences of those around us will continue to improve as well. We must not give up on our children.

Thank you for your continued support of the child nutrition programs and Child Nutrition Reauthorization. Thank you for maintaining high nutrition standards that teach our future generations ways to meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans so that we can continue to tackle the diet-related diseases that plague our country. After all, we must be successful in nutrition because our kids cannot be successful without it.