

September 24, 2014

The Honorable Tom Vilsack,
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

As organizations committed to the nutritional well-being and long-term success of America's school children, we write to express our appreciation for your support for USDA's State Competitive Equipment Assistance Grants to assist local school food service operators as they acquire updated kitchen equipment necessary to fully implement new national meal and competitive foods standards and improve food safety.

We are encouraged that both USDA and Congress have recognized the critical importance of helping schools invest in new equipment and updated kitchen infrastructure that enable schools to prepare and serve healthy, inviting meals. Research indicates that only 1 in 10 school districts nationwide (12 percent) has all the kitchen equipment needed to serve healthy foods. Only 42 percent of school food service directors report having budgets to purchase equipment, and fewer than half of those with any budget expect the funds to be adequate.

Resources recommended by USDA and provided by Congress are giving schools the tools they need to serve delicious foods that students enjoy, but that also help them to stay healthy and fit. As you know, childhood obesity rates have tripled over the past three decades, and according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in three children is overweight or obese. Even small investments can make a big difference: in 2009, Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour used \$1.3 million in private grant funds to replace conventional fryers with high-quality, commercial grade oven-steamers throughout the state. Mississippi school children like the new meals and are on a path to healthier eating. These healthier meals are one potential factor in Mississippi's recently reported obesity rate declines.

As you prepare your Fiscal Year 2016 budget request, we strongly urge you to continue to support USDA's State Competitive Equipment Assistance Grants through a \$50 million budget request, fully commensurate with their value and importance to local schools throughout the United States. Given the necessity of these funds, as well as the fact that many schools have tight budgets, we would encourage any accompanying directives to take into account an application process that would be open to all schools in need. Much progress has already been made with USDA's equipment assistance grants, but there is still much work to do to ensure that every school has the tools it needs to serve delicious, healthy meals every day.

We appreciate your attention to this matter and look forward to your continued support.

Sincerely yours,

National PTA
The Pew Charitable Trusts
School Food Focus – National
The School Nutrition Association (SNA)
The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND)
The American Heart Association (AHA)
California Food Policy Advocates
Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI)
First Focus Campaign for Children
MomsRising
The National Farm to School Network (NFSN)
Real Food For Kids – Montgomery County
United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable