



Testimony before the U.S. House Education and Workforce Committee

“Serving Students and Families through Child Nutrition Programs”

Ms. Julia Bauscher, SNS, President, School Nutrition Association; Director of School and Community Nutrition Services, Jefferson County Public Schools, Louisville, KY

Wednesday, April 15, 10:00 am
2175 Rayburn House Office Building

Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Scott, other members of the Committee, on behalf of the 55,000 members of the School Nutrition Association (SNA), thank you for the opportunity to discuss the vital role of school meal programs.

School nutrition professionals know the meals we provide are often the most nutritious, balanced meals that many children receive during the week. We are dedicated and passionate about supporting the 30 million students we serve. Our job is to nourish them for a successful school day and to help them make healthier choices.

Too often in schools across the country, students line up early at the cafeteria doors on Monday mornings, hungry for school breakfast after a weekend without enough food to eat at home. We all know growling stomachs can easily distract students, affecting their academic achievement.

With Congress' support, school nutrition professionals have been working diligently to meet students' nutritional needs, so they can give teachers their full attention. We are improving school lunch, expanding breakfast, and offering more after-school snacks, suppers and summer meals to ensure students have access to healthy meals, even when school is not in session.

These supplementary meals not only ease food insecurity among students, but also strengthen school meal programs. The more meals and snacks we serve, the less likely our programs will become a financial burden on school district budgets.

To ensure these meals contribute to healthier diets for our students, SNA members support new regulations limiting calories and unhealthy fat in school breakfast and lunch. We are proud to offer more whole grains, larger servings and a wider variety of fruits and vegetables and to reduce the sodium in our entrees and sides.

Schools nationwide are also committed to making these healthy choices appealing to students with initiatives like taste tests, Farm to School programs and Cornell University Smarter Lunchroom techniques. In my district we have steadily increased the quantity of local foods we serve, and we work with a local chef to help make nutritious recipes delicious.

School nutrition professionals don't want to lose ground on improvements made in the cafeteria. SNA will continue to support healthy changes, but some of the new regulations have resulted in unintended consequences, which threaten our ability to better serve students' nutritional needs. Congress must address the sharp increase in costs and waste and the historic decline in student lunch participation under the new requirements.

For thirty years, the National School Lunch Program has grown steadily, serving healthy lunches to more students each year. However, under new rules, 1.4 million fewer students choose school lunch each day, according to data from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

This participation challenge thwarts our shared goal of promoting healthier diets for *all* students, not just those who rely on free meals. Paid lunch participation has fallen by 15%, as students opt out of healthy school meals, too often in favor of less nutritious alternatives.

SNA is encouraged to see participation in the free meal category climb with schools' access to the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allows all students to eat for free without an application. In the 96 schools in my district participating in CEP, daily lunch participation is up 8%, and no one has to worry about embarrassing a student without lunch money.

However, schools outside of high poverty areas do not qualify for CEP. These schools struggle the most with decreasing participation, which reduces revenue when costs are rising.

USDA estimated that this year, schools must absorb \$1.2 billion in added costs as a result of the new rules. Even in my district, where CEP has increased daily revenue, I am continuing to experience a decline in my program's reserves for critical expenses like equipment replacements, marketing and nutrition education initiatives and emergency expenditures.

School meal programs operate on extremely tight budgets. We must cover labor and benefits, supplies, equipment, indirect costs and other expenses, leaving about \$1.25 to spend on the food for each lunch tray. This year, each half pint of milk costs my program a nickel more than last year. That one nickel adds over \$700,000 in additional costs to my program.

Meanwhile, a half cup of fresh fruit on average costs me 38 cents. Higher costs on a tight budget have forced our program to cut back on the variety of fresh fruits and vegetables we serve. This year, I reluctantly added juice back to my high school lunch menus as a cost saving measure. I haven't served juice at lunch in 15 years, in an effort to serve more fiber-rich whole fruits.

School meal programs can only cut so much. Without some relief, increased costs will impact more than the quality of meal programs – they will impact school district budgets as a whole.

School Nutrition Association has been working to support members in addressing all these challenges and connect them with solutions for their programs and students. We are partnering with other stakeholders, like Share Our Strength, on initiatives to support school meal programs, hosting best practices webinars and education sessions and working with USDA on its Team Up for School Nutrition Success Initiative, including a peer-to-peer mentoring program. We will continue these efforts to provide resources and share success stories.

We appreciate the Committee's recognition of the importance of maintaining strong school nutrition programs and your consideration of the school cafeteria perspective. SNA's 55,000 members will continue to be a resource in on-going discussions. We encourage all Members of Congress to visit a school cafeteria to see firsthand how school meals are prepared and talk with local school nutrition personnel about their unique successes and challenges.

Thank you again for inviting me here today and I'm happy to answer any questions the Committee has.