



September 14, 2015

Hon. Pat Roberts, Chair  
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry  
U.S. Senate  
328A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Hon. Debbie Stabenow, Ranking Member  
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry  
U.S. Senate  
328A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Hon. John Kline, Chair  
Committee on Education and the Workforce  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2181 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Hon. Bobby Scott, Ranking Member  
Committee on Education and the Workforce  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2101 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow, Chairman Kline and Ranking Member Scott:

As your Committees prepare to reauthorize the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, you have heard from nutrition advocates, parents, celebrity chefs, even military leaders. Too often lost in the dialogue about improving school menus is the voice of those working on the frontlines in school cafeterias.

I am proud to oversee the Nutrition Services Department in Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS), a program US Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack [hailed](#) as "a model for not just the state of Minnesota, but for the rest of the country." We offer scratch-prepared, creative menu choices like Rotisserie Chicken and Cornbread, served with Apple Kohlrabi Slaw and Strawberries. Unfortunately, new federal nutrition standards for school meals have contributed to significant losses and declining meal sales in our model program, once financially thriving.

School nutrition professionals aren't interested in reversing progress. We support increasing consumption of whole grains, fruits and vegetables, lowering sodium and following calorie and fat limits to combat childhood obesity. ***To sustain the progress we've achieved, Congress must provide school meal programs increased funding and commonsense flexibility under federal regulations.***

While well-intentioned, current mandates requiring all grains offered to be whole grain rich is unrealistic for schools, let alone families. How many of us eat *only* whole grain rich foods at every meal? Schools nationwide are proud to have increased student consumption of whole grains. In the push to make *all* school menu items meet this standard, we have lost the ability to appeal to students in diverse communities who don't eat foods like brown rice at home or in restaurants.

At the urging of parents, SPPS sought a temporary whole grain waiver to add culturally relevant dishes to menus, such as a prepared-from-scratch breakfast entree made with a Jasmine rice blend and scrambled eggs. A seemingly acceptable solution, except waivers are not available for all districts - schools nationwide should have the flexibility to make exceptions like these when planning menus.

Meanwhile, our registered dietitian warns that it will be virtually impossible to meet final sodium reduction mandates, even with our prepared-from-scratch lower-sodium recipes. Entrée salads with low-fat dressing and school-made

chicken and cornbread will be off the menu. We don't believe this was the intent when Congress passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act in 2010.

Schools work hard to expose students to healthy foods and support positive eating habits. Well before new rules took effect, our schools were encouraging students to take "All You Care to Eat" from our colorful fruit and vegetable "Choice Bar." School nutrition professionals know firsthand that offering kids a diverse selection of fresh produce helps achieve the end-goal of increasing consumption.

However, much like a family dinner-time standoff, making every student take a fruit or vegetable, whether they intend to eat it or not, has frustrated students and too often spoiled what should be a positive, healthy choice. New [research](#) from the University of Vermont found this mandate can even result in a slight decrease in consumption and an increase in waste.

It also contributes to the increased costs school districts have absorbed - USDA estimated the rules added \$1.2 billion in food and labor costs last year alone. As a result, even with the equipment and labor in place to serve creative, fresh-made meals, districts like SPPS have lost money and could be forced to cut into education funds to cover meal program losses.

We all want schools to prepare more foods from scratch using fresh, whole ingredients; however they are losing the necessary resources to achieve these goals. A School Nutrition Association [survey](#) found that nearly 8 in 10 school districts have taken steps to offset financial losses since implementing new standards. Almost half reduced staffing, and many cut into reserve funds and cancelled or deferred equipment purchases.

Unfortunately, rising costs and shrinking revenue under the new rules force us to limit popular, but pricey, choices like pea pods, mango, pineapple, melon, and roasted vegetables - once frequent options on SPPS menus.

Thanks to the new Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), SPPS has begun serving all students in some schools for free. We hope CEP will help us regain some student customers we've lost and bring in more revenue. Unfortunately, too few schools are eligible for CEP.

As President of the School Nutrition Association, I see and hear from members in schools across the country working tirelessly to make healthy changes succeed. It's heartbreaking to watch children walk away from healthy school meals in favor of junk food and to know that some of the progress we've made is financially unsustainable.

We all share the same goals, but we must account for the realities facing school cafeterias - from diverse student tastes to limited budgets. Congress must provide funding and flexibility to protect school meal programs and the children we serve.

Sincerely,



Jean Ronnei, SNS  
President, School Nutrition Association  
Chief Operations Officer, Saint Paul Public Schools, MN

cc: U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry  
U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce