

STATEMENT  
OF THE  
AMERICAN SCHOOL FOOD SERVICE ASSOCIATION  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION & FORESTRY  
UNITED STATES SENATE  
MARCH 4, 2003

Mr. Chairman, Senator Harkin, Members of the Committee, I am Gaye Lynn MacDonald, President of the American School Food Service Association (ASFSA), and the Program Manager of Food Services in Bellingham, Washington. With me this morning is Paula Cockwell, Manager of Nutrition Services for Adams 14 School District in Littleton, Colorado and Chair of our Public Policy and Legislative Committee, Margie Green, Food Service Director for Marshall County Schools, Holly Springs, MS and President of the Mississippi School Food Service Association, Teresa Nece, Food Service Director, Des Moines, Iowa, our Counsel, Marshall Matz, and a few hundred of the best child nutrition administrators from throughout the country.

Let me begin by thanking you and the Committee for again accommodating ASFSA and continuing a very special tradition of holding this hearing during our Legislative Action Conference. We are delighted to be with you this morning to discuss child nutrition and explore how we might further improve these important federal programs. The federal child nutrition programs are a major success story, serving over 28 million children each school day.

ASFSA believes that 2003 is a pivotal year for child nutrition. Reauthorization of child nutrition programs offers an excellent opportunity for the Congress to consider changes that will improve health outcomes for children and further the goals of *No Child Left Behind*. Congress should reauthorize those programs that expire in 2003 (WIC, Commodity Distribution, State Administrative Expense, the National Food Service Management Institute and the Summer Food Service Program). Additionally, ASFSA advances, for your consideration, a number of proposals to strengthen school and community based child nutrition programs.

Mr. Chairman, ongoing studies confirm that a hungry child cannot learn effectively. A hungry child is distracted from learning and is more likely to experience discipline and health problems. It is critically important that child nutrition programs be effectively extended and easily accessible to all children who are eligible.

## **PROGRAM ACCESS**

\* Many children from families qualified in the reduced price category are not participating in the lunch and breakfast programs because they can't afford the fee of 40¢ for a lunch or 30¢ for a breakfast. While that may not seem like a lot of money to those of us in this room, to families with household incomes between 130% and 185% of the poverty line, many with more than one child, it is often too much.

The reduced price fee is a major barrier to the working poor, particularly at the end of the month when we see the reduced category participation rates decline.

As you know, in the WIC program, all those with family incomes below 185% of poverty, and who otherwise qualify, receive benefits without charge. This same income guideline should be extended to the school nutrition programs. The reduced price category is by far the smallest of the current school meal categories---free, reduced, and paid - less than 10% of the meals served are served to children in the reduced price category. The reduced price co-pay should be eliminated and meals should be available at no cost to all children with family income up to 185% of poverty. Schools should be reimbursed for these meals at the free rate. This change provides support to working families who are already struggling to keep up with increases in housing, fuel, health and childcare costs.

\* Consistent with a GAO analysis showing the gap between the cost to produce a school lunch we propose the federal reimbursement rates for all meal categories be increased. The current reimbursement rate of \$2.14 for a free lunch is simply inadequate. The rates for reduced and "paid" meals are not adequate either resulting in higher and higher prices being charged to the paying child. The gap between the costs of doing business and reimbursement rates widens each year as costs escalate at a rate greater than the federal rates increase. And, as I will share later, federal nutrition guidelines are expensive to implement.

\* It is also our recommendation, that Congress extend the USDA commodity program to the school breakfast program. Schools currently receive 15¼¢ in USDA commodities for each reimbursable lunch served. This commodity assistance is very helpful and much appreciated, not only by schools but also by the agriculture communities in the states. The school breakfast program, however, receives no USDA commodity assistance. We recommend that USDA contribute 5¢ in commodities for each breakfast served in the program.

## **HEALTHY CHILDREN**

The American School Food Service Association is deeply committed to the health of our nation's children and is working collaboratively to further positive health outcomes. We are about good nutrition not just providing food. As you know, we strongly supported amending the National School Lunch Act to require implementation of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

According to the most recent USDA study on the subject, schools are making very significant progress in implementing the Dietary Guidelines. The fat content of a reimbursable meal is down significantly, and an increasing variety of fruits and vegetables are more readily available. Program operators have modified food preparation methods and re-written product specifications to lower fat, sodium and sugars. Industry has responded to our requests and familiar student favorites like pizza, burgers and fries

are part of meals meeting the Dietary Guidelines. (this phrase is incorporated in the paragraph above)

We are proud of the meals our members serve but it is not realistic to expect children to select a lunch in school that is much different from the meals they consume outside of school. Further, the school lunch program---the USDA reimbursable meal---has significant competition inside and outside the school. Every day program operators are caught between the challenges of very limited resources, pressure to cover all direct and indirect costs or to even be a “profit center” for the district, competition from other groups selling food on campus and the demands of the customer.

Our customer is no longer a captive market. Young people are making more and more of their own decisions beginning at a very early age and have options other than a school meal available. For example, a la carte is increasingly available at all grade levels and many high schools have open campuses and a limited number of lunch periods both of which encourage students to leave school for lunch.

\* ASFSA recommends that an additional 10¢ per meal be provided to schools to further improve the nutritional quality of school meals. There are significant costs associated with meeting nutrition standards, such as continuing to increase the availability and variety of fruits and vegetables and to purchase products consistent with the Dietary Guidelines.

This past year, ASFSA joined with the National Dairy Council on a research project to determine if changes in the way milk is marketed in schools can increase consumption of milk and the nutrients it provides. The results of the test are very positive. We are providing the Committee with a copy of the report. But there are some cost implications in implementing the recommendations of the study.

\* The recent “Call to Action to Prevent Overweight and Obesity” recommends that schools “adopt policies ensuring that all foods and beverages available on school campuses and at school events contribute toward eating patterns that are consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans”. We urge the Congress and the Administration to implement the recommendation of Secretary Tommy Thompson, and the Surgeon General, with regard to foods available in school.

\*Financial support for nutrition education continues to fade into oblivion. Not many years ago nutrition education was a federal entitlement program, a small program, but one that provided some guaranteed funding. Nutrition education is now a discretionary program without any funding. Students cannot learn to make healthy food choices without access to age appropriate nutrition education. At a minimum, we propose an entitlement of ½¢ per meal be allocated to states to develop state and local infrastructures to deliver nutrition education.

### **PROGRAM INTEGRITY**

Mr. Chairman, ASFSA members are public employees. We take very seriously our responsibility to administer the programs consistent with the law. We are aware of concerns raised by reports indicating that there MAY be an excessive error rate in the numbers of students receiving free and reduced-price benefits in the federal school meal programs. It is a subject we have discussed with USDA at great length.

We believe that:

- Reasonable income verification requirements are necessary to guarantee that the program is administered consistent with current law.
- Eligible students should not be intimidated by excessive income verification requirements and
- The greater the regulatory burden on the program, the greater the cost to produce a meal.

In an effort to respond appropriately and reasonably, ASFSA offers these recommendations:

- Make school meal application approval valid for the full year.
- Expand the use of categorical eligibility, such as is currently authorized for TANF and Food Stamps, and expand the use of direct certification for the school meals application process. Categorical approval should be expanded to include state children's health insurance programs, Medicaid and SSI, where state eligibility guidelines for these programs are compatible with school meal eligibility guidelines. Furthermore, ASFSA supports requiring states to provide approved lists to local school districts for direct certification.
- Replace the current verification requirements with 100% verification of error-prone applications at the time of submission. Current regulations require school food authorities to verify a percentage of all applications received. A GAO study demonstrated that applications within \$100 of the maximum allowable monthly income to qualify for free or reduced price meals are more likely to contain errors (error-prone). Verifying all applications received would act as a significant barrier to participation by eligible children as has been demonstrated by a USDA study.

## **FOOD SAFETY**

Last, but definitely not least, allow me to comment on food safety. Maintaining high food safety standards in the federal nutrition programs is critical to their success and is an ongoing high priority for ASFSA. Data shows that in the majority of schools nationwide the foodservice staff demonstrates very high standards and performance in safe handling of food. We support the public expectation that foods be handled using consistently monitored and reinforced food safety training and techniques for foodservice staff – as is found in most school meal programs across the Country. The United States has the most abundant and safest food supply in the world. But food safety it is not an area in which to take any chances, particularly when we are talking about the nation's children.

Therefore, ASFSA has outlined legislation that ensures the development and implementation of food safety systems in all schools participating in the federal school lunch program. The legislation includes funding for development of such a program, for training consistent with the program, for facility improvements necessary to meet these standards and development of a reasonable implementation time frame.

## **CONCLUSION**

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, we present to you a very full agenda for the child nutrition programs. We do appreciate that we are meeting at a very difficult time for the United States, and that the Congress has many issues to address. However, the health and well being of our children is paramount to the security and future development of our Country. It is our responsibility, as those who work in child nutrition programs, to share our views on what is needed to assure that healthful meals and nutrition education are available to all children. The success of a culture is often measured by how it nurtures its children. A traditional Masai greeting – “Kasserian Ingera” asks “and how are the children?” It is our joint responsibility to assure that the children in the United States of America are well.

We look forward to working with the Committee, and the Congress, on the 2003 child nutrition reauthorization legislation. We would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have. Thank you very much for your continuing support of child nutrition.