

Mr. Chairman, thank you so very much for convening this important hearing and for allowing me the opportunity to testify. Nutrition programs, a central mission of this Committee, have always enjoyed a very special tradition of bipartisan support.

This past year, working together, we crafted the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, which the President signed into law on June 30th.

We know that child nutrition and education are inextricably linked. It really is fairly simple: When children are hungry they do not learn. To compete effectively in the world market, the United States must have an educated workforce, and to educate our children to their maximum potential we must have strong and effective child nutrition programs if we expect each and every child to meet his or her potential.

The President has continued his support for child nutrition as demonstrated by his budget proposal - a very lean budget but one that recognizes the importance of the child nutrition programs. I am encouraged that the President's proposed budget does not involve program cuts or budget caps for child nutrition. The nutrition programs are an important component of this Committee's jurisdiction, and I know that you, Mr. Chairman, and the other members of this Committee will work hard to ensure that the fundamental mission of these programs is not compromised. I look forward to working with you on those challenges, and I urge my colleagues on this Committee to follow the President's lead and work to protect these child nutrition programs.

Let me also raise one area of particular interest and concern for me: The eligibility requirements for the School Lunch and Breakfast programs should be consistent with the WIC program. As we know, the School Lunch and Breakfast programs have three income categories: free, reduced and paid meals. The children from families whose income is between 130 percent of poverty and 185 percent of poverty are eligible for reduced price meals. It is the smallest of the three categories.

Unfortunately, many state and local school boards have informed me that many parents are finding it difficult to pay the reduced price fee, and for some families the fee is an insurmountable barrier to participation. There are a number of great individuals who work daily with these children...who take money from their own pockets to help bridge this inequity. In fact, many of them are here today in this hearing room representing the School Nutrition Association.

This is why I am a strong supporter of legislation to eliminate the reduced price fee and harmonize the school meal income eligibility guideline with WIC. If a family qualifies for free WIC benefits, they should also qualify for free school meals. It just makes sense, and I fundamentally believe this is the right thing to do. For those individuals who currently fall into the reduced price category, this will help make all the difference in the world - the difference between sitting in class hungry and malnourished, or comfortable and attentive. For a number of these children, particularly in today's fast-food climate, the meals they are offered at school are by far the best they receive all day.

Last year's child nutrition legislation authorized a pilot program funded from discretionary

dollars to eliminate the reduced price fee in up to 5 states. It is imperative that we begin to make headway on eliminating the reduced price category as a part of our national commitment to eliminating hunger and nutritional deficiencies among the children of this country.

I have written to Appropriations Chairman Cochran, Subcommittee Chairman Bennett and Ranking Member Kohl asking for funds to initiate the pilot we authorized. I encourage the members of this Committee to join me in this request. I have suggested an appropriation of \$29 million, but the exact amount will ultimately depend on which states are selected by the Department of Agriculture.

Mr. Chairman, I applaud you for your leadership and commitment to child nutrition. In addition, let me also take this opportunity to thank you for your staunch defense of all sectors of agriculture across this country. I know our farm families in North Carolina are so pleased to have you at the helm of this Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to address these concerns.