

U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Hearing on Nutrition in Schools

March 6, 2007

Testimony of Mary Lou Hennrich
Executive Director, Community Health Partnership

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today before your committee. My name is Mary Lou Hennrich. My 35 year career as a public health nurse and administrator finds me currently serving as the executive director of Community Health Partnership: Oregon's Public Health Institute based in Portland, Oregon. Community Health Partnership is an independent, non-profit organization committed to improving the health of Oregonians. In recent years, our organization has led statewide efforts to improve the nutritional quality of foods and beverages in schools. In addition, I have advocated for stronger school nutrition standards in Portland Public Schools, my local school district--Oregon's largest district.

The challenges we have encountered in our efforts at the local and state level have made very clear to us the need for strong federal leadership on this issue. That is why our organization has endorsed Senators Harkin and Murkowski's Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act, which we urge the Senate to pass this year.

Local Control

Parents don't care whether school food standards come from Congress, a state or the local school district. To them, local control means that they have control over what their kids eat at school.

And parents have told us loudly and clearly that they want the foods sold in their children's schools to be healthy. The sale of low-nutrition foods in schools undermines parents' ability to help their children eat a healthful diet. Parents should not have to worry that their children will spend their lunch money on low-nutrition foods from vending machines, school stores, and a la carte in the cafeteria, instead of on balanced school meals.

While we respect that many school-related policies are left to local control, school foods are different. School foods have been a federal issue since the Truman administration. Congress and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) set detailed standards for school lunches and breakfasts. The federal government invests huge amounts of money - \$10 billion in fiscal year 2006 alone - in school lunches and breakfasts. Selling low-nutrition food in schools undermines that major taxpayer investment and efforts to ensure that school meals are healthy.

Most states and localities leave the development of dietary guidance to federal agencies. The majority of the nation's 14,000 school districts are not equipped to develop science-based nutrition standards for school foods. A recent national analysis found that only 20% of the largest 100 school districts in the country have set specific nutrition standards for a la carte and vending in their recently-passed local wellness policies. In Oregon, after analyzing the 174 local

district wellness policies filed with the state department of education, we found exactly the same percentage (19.5%) of policies that set any specific guidelines or standards for foods sold outside the NSLP.

All other things being equal, local control is an important consideration. However, the inherent value of local control must be weighed against the significant threat that childhood obesity poses to our children's health. Rates of obesity among U.S. children and teens tripled between 1980 and 2002. For individuals born in 2000, the chance of developing diabetes during their lifetime is 39% for females and 33% for males. When almost 40% of girls and one-third of boys are on track to develop diet-related diabetes, one needs to re-examine both the value and the effectiveness of local control with regards to children's health and nutrition.

Things have drastically changed in schools over the past 20+ years. When my oldest child was in school, 99% of eating happened in the cafeteria--now that she is a teacher, she reports that more than 75% of eating occurs in hallways and classrooms. Indeed there is a lot of food sold through venues other than school meals in the cafeteria. Nationally, 83% of elementary schools, 97% of middle/junior high schools, and 99% of senior high schools sell foods and beverages out of vending machines, school stores, or a la carte in the cafeteria. Unfortunately, too many of the choices offered to children are of poor nutritional value.

Revenue Considerations

The current sale of low-nutrition food in outside school meals programs undermines school lunch revenues. For example, when Jefferson County School District in Kentucky set nutrition standards for items sold through its a la carte line, it experienced an annual decrease of \$3 million in a la carte revenue; however, at the same time it saw a \$6.9 million annual increase in school meal program revenue, resulting in a net annual increase of \$3.7 million for the county's school food service programs. Portland Public Schools are finding the same to be true as they implement significant changes this school year. Improving the nutritional quality of foods sold outside school meals will strengthen the National School Lunch Program.

As the USDA and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention documented in their report "Making It Happen," students will buy and consume healthful beverages - and schools can make money from selling healthful options. Of 17 schools and school districts they surveyed that tracked income after switching to healthier options, 12 increased revenue and four reported no change. The one school district that did lose revenue in the short term experienced a subsequent revenue increase after the study was completed.

Our organization surveyed Oregon school districts in 2003 regarding the revenue raised by their beverage vending contracts. We found that total vending revenues for school districts range between \$12 and \$24 per student per year. This modest amount of revenue could be raised by selling only the healthier beverages offered by the major beverage companies, e.g. Pepsi and Coca Cola, or through other, healthier fundraisers (e.g., water, 100% juice, low-calorie diet drinks).

In the larger school finance picture, beverage contracts really raise only a comparatively small

amount of funds. District contract revenues amount to less than half a percent of annual district per-student spending. Also, most of the money generated from school vending contracts comes from students purchasing beverages, and a significant portion of this revenue goes directly to the companies, as opposed to the schools. Vendors also gain exclusive advertising rights to promote and increase the sale of products in schools.

Voluntary Guidelines Are Not the Answer

In 2006, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, the nation's largest soft drink companies, and several snack food companies announced voluntary guidelines for nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold in schools. The new beverage guidelines are laudable. However, the magnitude of the obesity problem necessitates a more certain solution. These voluntary guidelines are unenforceable. Importantly, schools have not agreed to the guidelines, and it remains to be seen whether and to what extent schools will accept and comply with them.

Unfortunately, in Portland, OR, a soft drink company is using this agreement to punish the school district for establishing nutrition standards different from the industry's guidelines. Last fall, as part of its wellness policy, Portland Public Schools removed all carbonated soda and other sugary drinks from its schools. Now, Coca-Cola is threatening Portland Public Schools with a \$600,000 penalty for disallowing the sale of sports drinks and diet soda in schools, since according to the industry's voluntary guidelines they are allowed. It does not seem to matter to them that parents and schools in Portland want sugary beverages like sports drinks out of schools. So much for the local control argument.

In closing, I again urge this Committee and the rest of the Senate to set national nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold out of vending machines, school stores, and a la carte in schools. Since childhood obesity and the proliferation of low-nutrition foods throughout schools have reached a crisis point, it is important that Congress act now to address this pressing problem. Parents and, more importantly, America's children are counting on you. Thank you, and I would be happy to answer questions.