

Chairman Chambliss, our congratulations to you on assuming the Chairmanship of this great Committee. We look forward to continuing the special tradition between child nutrition and the great state of Georgia. Chairman Cochran, thank you very much for your leadership on child nutrition and we wish you all the best as you move to Appropriations.....where we may still come and visit. Senator Harkin, and all members of the Committee, thank you for your leadership on the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization and for continuing the tradition of this hearing.

I am Karen Johnson, President of the School Nutrition Association, formerly the American School Food Service Association; I am also the Director of Child Nutrition in Yuma, Arizona. With me is Dora Rivas, the Chair of our Public Policy and Legislative Committee, and the Director of Child Nutrition in Dallas, Texas. We are supported by a few hundred of our dedicated colleagues, and our Counsel, Marshall Matz.

#### BUDGET RECONCILIATION

As we meet here today, we are all aware of the difficult budget challenge that you face and that we all face as Americans. The size of the federal deficit and the national debt is simply daunting and overwhelming. We are concerned about what it means for the economic health of the United States and for future generations.

Nonetheless, we are here on behalf of our most important resource, our children. We believe deeply that the child nutrition programs we administer are vital to the education of our children and their health and well-being. As we all know, hungry children do not learn. Without these important child nutrition programs children are distracted in school and less receptive to the lessons being taught. Students are more prone to illness and school attendance suffers. We therefore ask that these programs be exempted from any reconciliation or budget cap that the Congress may enact. President Bush has held the child nutrition programs harmless in the drive to cut the deficit and we believe that is the correct position for the country.

In 1981, the child nutrition programs were cut by approximately one third and we lost three million children from the school lunch program. It took over twenty years before participation in the program rebounded to the pre-1981 level.

In 2005, the programs are struggling financially much more than they were in 1981. The federal reimbursement rates are generally not adequate to cover the cost of the meal. The current federal reimbursement rate for a "free" lunch is \$2.25 per meal with an additional 17 cents in USDA commodities. It is very challenging, and often impossible, to produce a balanced nutritious meal for that amount of money. Even a small cut of 5% or 10% would have a dramatic effect on meal quality and student participation. Historically, we found that for every 1 cent increase in the price of the meal to students, schools lost 1% participation. We believe that any decrease in the federal reimbursement rate at this time would have a much greater effect.

Mr. Chairman, allow me to mention in passing, that it is the shortfall in the federal reimbursement rate that has, in great part, led to the introduction and expansion of other food items through a la carte lines and vending operations. Research has demonstrated that students who choose school meals have better diets than children who don't. They consume more fruits, vegetables and milk, and have fewer overall calories from fat.

#### ELIMINATION OF REDUCED PRICE MEALS

Last year in the Reauthorization Act, the Congress authorized a pilot program in up to five states, to eliminate the reduced price meal program. Under the pilot, the free meal eligibility guideline would be increased from 130% to 185% of poverty, the same guideline used in the WIC to determine who is eligible for free WIC benefits. We urge funding for this important pilot.

Over five hundred local and state school boards have endorsed the elimination of the reduced price program. For too many families in this income category, the reduced price fee of 40 cents per meal per child for lunch and 30 cents for breakfast is simply too much money and therefore a barrier to participation. The reduced price category is the smallest of the three income categories; approximately 9% of the children in the school lunch program are in the

reduced category. Eliminating the reduced fee would extend the benefits of the school meal program to low income working households and, we believe, should be tested through the pilot program.

The amount of money needed for the pilot would, of course, depend on the size of the states selected by USDA to participate. The Department will not select the states until money is appropriated. Senator Dole, the sponsor of the legislation proposing the elimination of the reduced price category, has suggested an appropriation of \$29 million. We support this amount.

#### SUMMER FOOD SERVICE

The Summer Food Service Program is the most underutilized of the federal nutrition programs. While almost 16 million children participate in the free or reduced price meal programs at school, only 2 million children are served during the summer months. One of the biggest barriers to participation is the lack of approved sponsors. One of the major barriers to recruiting sponsors is the burdensome administrative requirements for the program.

Several years ago Chairman Lugar authored a provision calling for a pilot program to demonstrate the effect of simplified administration of the program. The fourteen state pilot reduced paperwork by using the same method of program reimbursement used in the regular school meal program.

The pilot worked well and last year the pilot was made permanent and the number of states participating in the program was increased from fourteen to twenty. We would encourage the Congress to further increase the number of States until every state operates under the simplified procedures of the "Lugar pilots".

#### NUTRITION EDUCATION AND PROMOTION

Childhood obesity has captured the nation's attention, as well it should. The statistics are frightening. Yet, for all we are spending as a nation on federal nutrition programs and health care costs for diseases where obesity is risk factor, we spend almost nothing on nutrition education and nutrition promotion. The Reauthorization Act authorized several initiatives in this area.

The first is teaching children to make healthy choices in the foods they eat and the importance of physical activity. The Act authorizes a Team Nutrition Network that would combine support for the Team Nutrition Program with a program of grants to the states and local districts to deliver both Team Nutrition materials and programs developed by the states and local districts.

Children today are bombarded with many messages about what they should eat. It is essential that children also receive balanced, positive messages to reinforce the health curriculum being taught in the classroom. Therefore, we urge the Congress to appropriate 50 cents per child per year for nutrition education and nutrition promotion. This modest amount of money would complement the investment being made in the nutrition programs by helping children learn to make healthy food choices and engage in physical activity.

Mr. Chairman, Senator Harkin and all members of the committee thank you again for the opportunity to present this testimony. We would all be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.