

## Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry

### *A Review of Child Nutrition Programs*

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216 Hart Senate Office Building

Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow, other members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today and share in the discussion of a review of Child Nutrition Programs and our common mission of protecting the health of our nation's youth and the integrity of all federally funded nutrition programs.

Childhood hunger in West Virginia (WV) is as prevalent today than ever before. More than one in five West Virginia children live in a household that does not have sufficient access to food. Sixty percent (60%) of West Virginia school-aged children qualify for free or reduced priced school meals. That's 173,383 children whose family household income is below or nearly below the federal poverty level. Many of the remaining forty percent that do not qualify for free meals are the working poor. Those families struggling to pay the monthly bills while being confronted with a sizable lunch bill. Often times, the meals provided at school are the only nutritious meals that these children receive daily. Without adequate access to food, these children are at risk for health problems, obesity, nutrient deficiencies, and difficulties with learning and discipline that can echo throughout a lifetime.

The federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 provided many changes and challenges to school districts all across our great nation. The new provisions of this Act placed children's health at the forefront of the Reauthorization process by adopting landmark progressive nutrition standards that focused on improving the nutritional composition of school meals while addressing the foods and beverages made available to students throughout the school environment. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss with you here today, a state agency's perspective of implementing these new standards and rules on a statewide basis.

West Virginia got an early start to implementing the provisions of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. As you are aware, Congress directed the Center for Disease Control (CDC) to undertake a study with the Institute of Medicine (IOM) to review and make recommendations about appropriate nutritional standards for the availability, sale, content and consumption of foods at school, with attention on competitive foods. In April of 2007, the IOM released their report, *Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools: Leading the Way toward Healthier Youth*. On January 10, 2008, the West Virginia Board of Education (WVBOE) repealed and replaced its *Policy 4321.1, Standards for School Nutrition*, and quickly adopted the IOM recommended standards. West Virginia's legislative rule established nutrition standards for foods sold, served and/or distributed to students in schools during the school day. The policy addressed both the nutritional standards for school meals and other foods and beverages sold, served or distributed to students outside the cafeteria throughout the entire school environment. West Virginia's *Standards for School Nutrition*, was one of the first state board policies to adopt and implement many of the provisions stipulated in the Institute of Medicine's Report from their Committee on Nutrition Standards for Food in Schools.

Initially, many school food service personnel, students and parents balked at the new nutritional changes. Additionally, school administrators, staff and fundraising groups did not approve or support the new guidelines. Lunch participation rates initially dropped and complaints were a common occurrence. The WV Office of Child Nutrition developed a comprehensive implementation plan for the new policy. The plan focused on the education of school administrators, school nutrition workers and school staff. The media, workshops, guidance memos and a parent website assisted in explaining the need for the nutritional standards changes and help garner support for the new initiatives. A "From-Scratch" statewide training was provided to the cook staff as a means to reduce the serving of processed, heat-n-serve items high in saturated fat and sodium. As the acceptance of the changes in the school meals menus and competitive food rules improved, meal participation rates started to rebound and improve. By the time the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 passed, WV was starting to make miraculous improvements in their school meals. Fresh fruits and vegetable salad bars were becoming more and more popular. Skim and low fat milk were no longer a topic of discussion and students were now asking for more of the "brown bread". Soft drink and unhealthy vending machines no longer cluttered our school hallways. Unhealthy fundraising programs like the "cookie dough" and "candy bar" sales were now a thing of the past. School administrators were no longer balancing their school budgets on the backs of our children's health.

In 2010, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act came along and strengthened our state's already strong nutrition standards. The Act brought with it even more changes to our nutrition programs, but this time we were poised to make the changes seamlessly throughout our state. We were ahead of the curve so to speak. With our IOM nutrition standards in place, and in anticipation of the many regulatory changes to come, the Office of Child Nutrition decided to focus on the technology side of our program. The WV Office of Child Nutrition established a food service director's list serve comprised of every food service director's email address. The list serve allows the state agency to communicate with all 55 county school districts with the push of the "send" button. Paper communications and "snail mail" were now obsolete. The list serve also allowed anyone on the list to communicate with their peers and fostered statewide communication among the nutrition directors. Menu sharing, cooperative purchasing and problem solving were starting to evolve.

In 2009, WV implemented the first statewide counting and claiming system. Our state utilizes one software application throughout the entire state. The Point of Sale (POS) software is housed in every school cafeteria in our state. It interfaces with each of our 55 local education agencies, as well as, the state agency office. The computer application counts, categorizes and claims every reimbursable meal served to a participating student on a daily basis and generates a lunch bill for the parents of those students that are of paying status. State agency staff has the capability of knowing if any child in our state participated in breakfast or lunch in real time from their office computer from the state agency office. This statewide application also assists in the determination of student eligibility for meal benefits. Statewide Direct Certification was born along with statewide student eligibility. The West Virginia Department of Education and the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources combined efforts to extend meal benefits to families in need through an agreement to share data for determining meal eligibility without completing the application process. This direct certification match is completed weekly and students are identified as free meal recipients at the state agency level and student status is pushed down to the school level electronically. Since the eligibility determination is made at the state agency level, as families move and relocate throughout the state, a student's eligibility status follows them, thereby eliminating any interruption to their meal benefits. Families are no longer required to "reapply" for meal benefits at the new school they are relocating to. This advancement significantly increased the federal meal reimbursement revenues for the state of West Virginia. Additionally, uncollectable student lunch bill bad debts were also reduced substantially.

The statewide automation of our POS system also streamlined the monitoring of our program sponsors. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act changed the monitoring frequency of our programs from a five year cycle to a three year cycle. This change became a challenge for some states; however our monitoring time in the field was reduced by approximately fifty percent (50%) as a result of our statewide system. Our technology enables us to complete much of our audits and reviews from our offices at the state agency in Charleston, WV. Claims for federal reimbursement, meal application monitoring, the verification process and direct certification reviews can now be completed prior to entering the school or district from our main offices. Additionally, the system has programmed edit checks and audit functions to prevent duplicate claims, fraudulent claims and over payments to program sponsors.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 also created a very innovative and progressive approach to providing nutritious meals to low-income children. The statewide automation of our POS system also facilitated the implementation of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) by enabling the state agency to determine which schools and districts were eligible. CEP is an innovative universal free meal service option designed to make it easier for low-income children to receive meals in the school meals program. CEP is an alternative to collecting, approving and verifying household eligibility applications for free and reduced price eligible students in high poverty local education agencies. To be eligible for CEP, the school or schools within a county must have a percentage of enrolled students who were *Identified Students*; this primarily includes students who are directly certified for free meals on the basis of their participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program. Once a school or district qualifies and agrees to participate in CEP, **all** children are able to participate in breakfast and lunch at no charge to the parents.

In school year (SY) 2011-2012, Community Eligibility Provision was available as a pilot. During a three year period, USDA selected eleven states to participate in the pilot that helped shape the final regulations for the Provision. Initially, WV was not selected to participate as a pilot state; however, we did it anyway. WV sponsored its own version of community eligibility entitled “WV Universal Free Meals Pilot Project”. Fortunately, WV was selected to participate in round two of the pilot that began the very next year (SY 2012-2013). West Virginia seized the opportunity and forfeited the “pilot” approach and implemented the initiative immediately. Beginning this year, SY2014-2015, all schools nationwide that meet the required identified student threshold are eligible to participate in this Provision.

**Community Eligibility Provision in WV (55 counties / 688 schools statewide - 54% participation)**

	SY 2012-2013	SY 2013-2014	SY 2014-2015
Number of counties with at least one CEP eligible school	54	52	54
Number of counties participating in CEP	35	39	40
Number of counties implementing CEP countywide	11	14	17
Number of schools participating	283	335	374
Number of students impacted	90,000	>110,000	128,041

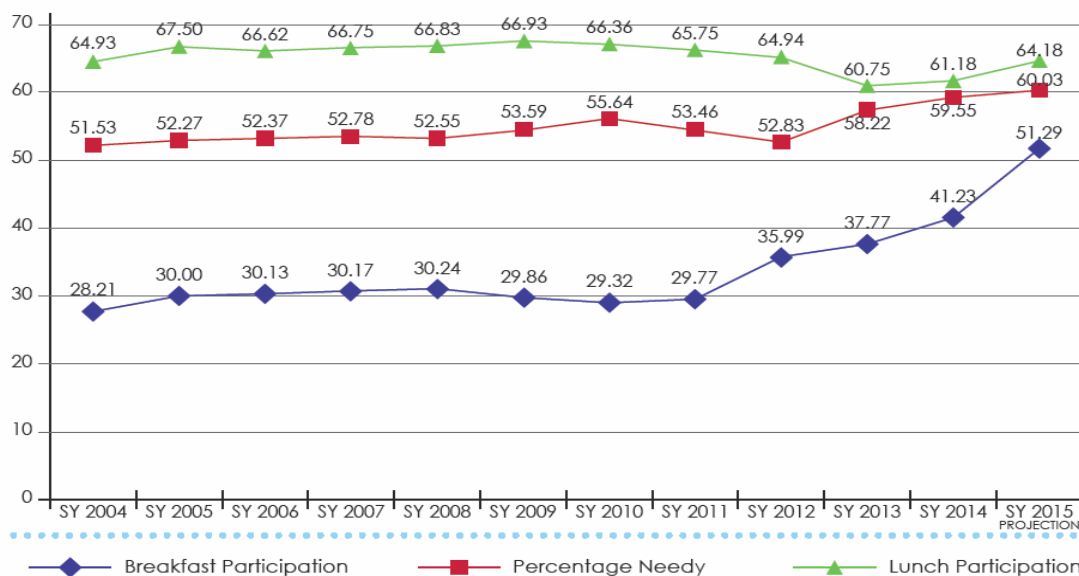


with the start of the school day. In WV, as in most states, breakfast was typically offered at the worst possible time of the day; at the beginning of school. Students are arriving, buses are late, the tardy bell is ringing and most kids want to talk to their friends. Breakfast was set up to fail. In our state, we were not even meeting the needs of our hungriest students. Our state is comprised of approximately 60% needy students, those children that qualify for free or reduced price meals. Prior to community eligibility and the WV Feed to Achieve Act, we were serving only 29% of our enrolled children a breakfast on a regular basis. To be successful and meet the needs of the students, breakfast must be readily accessible by the students. Implementation of these innovative breakfast delivery strategies began in fiscal year 2013, with full implementation required in all schools at the start of the 2015 school year. Innovative breakfast delivery strategies include, but are not limited to: Grab-N-Go Breakfast, Breakfast in the Classroom, Breakfast After First, or a combination of the three.



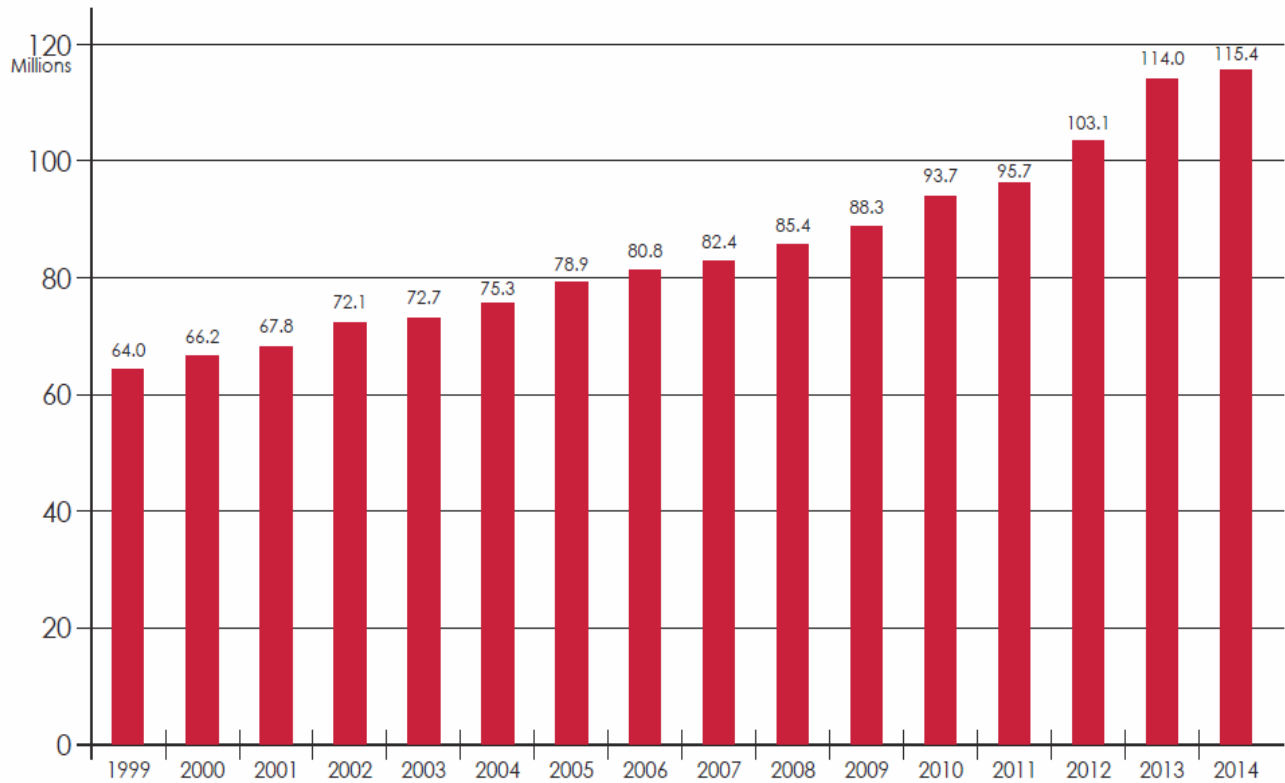
## HISTORICAL PERFORMANCE

Based on trend data, it is projected that there will be over a 10 percent increase in breakfast participation for School Year (SY) 2015:



The West Virginia Office of Child Nutrition administers six United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) nutrition programs for children. They include the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, Summer Food Service Program, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and the Special Milk Program. In West Virginia, more than \$115 million dollars assists program sponsors to provide healthy, low-cost or free meals and snacks to children and functionally impaired adults in a variety of settings, including public and private schools, child care centers, residential institutions, shelters, family day care homes, summer camps and parks. In addition to providing nutritious meals and snacks, child nutrition programs promote lifelong healthful eating practices by integrating nutrition education, creating healthy learning environments and promoting nutrition in the community. Child nutrition programs are intended to serve the nutritional needs of all children, regardless of family income. Since the inception of the National School Lunch Act almost 70 years ago, Congress has affirmed the importance of sound nutrition to the health and welfare of children. The chart below reflects the amount of federal funds, in millions, which the WV, OCN has administered throughout the state for child nutrition programs since the year 1999.

## West Virginia Office of Child Nutrition Federal Funding Trend Analysis



The fight to combat childhood obesity rages on while I live in a state where childhood obesity and hunger live side by side. We have made great strides to change school campuses and provide our students with a safe and healthy learning environment. Our children spend the majority of their waking hours at school. Schools should be held to a higher standard when it comes to our children's safety and health. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act included many significant changes that have already manifested into positive outcomes for children. West Virginia was fortunate to have a head start with the implementation of many of the provisions of the Act and now stand upon our eighth year of applying the new standards. Student meals are healthier than any time before. Student meal participation rates are at an all-time high across our state. Federal funding needed to server nutritious meals and stave off hunger is the highest level it has ever been. The new standards are in place and children are participating and families are receiving financial relief from the community eligibility provision. West Virginia, a small, poor, coal mining state nestled in the hills of Appalachia has implemented all of the provisions of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. I can honestly say that if West Virginia, a state with limited resources, can achieve success and change the school environment; it is within reach of any state. Passion, determination and a will to provide a healthier future for our children can move mountains.

In closing, I would like thank Chairman Roberts for the opportunity to be here today and address the Committee on such an important issue. I have dedicated my career to the support and improvement of Child Nutrition Programs. The health of our youth is critical to every aspect of our future. I urge this committee and Congress to continue the great work that you are doing to help make our children, our programs and our future a success.

