

Testimony of
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before the
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
Hearing: A Review of Child Nutrition Programs
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Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow, Members of the Committee: I would first like to express my gratitude for having me here to testify. Throughout the State of Kansas we have thousands of hardworking school nutrition professionals who understand that the meals they provide are often the best meals that many of their students receive. Our goal is to ensure that all children receive the nutrition required for their health and academic success. Hungry children simply cannot learn and thrive.

This is my 22nd year working in School Nutrition. In my position, I am responsible for all financial and business aspects of our school nutrition programs.

The Olathe Public Schools is the second largest school district in Kansas. We have 51 schools, two Head Start programs and an enrollment of over 29,000 students. Twenty-seven percent of our students receive free or reduced priced meals.

Our school nutrition team has 275 employees, including two Registered Dietitians. We serve approximately 24,000 meals per day (over 4 million meals per year) on a \$12.5 million budget.

At Olathe, we are committed to delivering nutritious meals to at-risk students. We have had significant successes in serving vulnerable populations thanks to a well-coordinated effort by the community, school district and foodservices operation.

An example of this is our Universal Free breakfast in the classroom program at five elementary schools. Each morning our staff loads breakfast into rolling bags. The bags are then picked up by students or school staff and delivered to each classroom. When the students arrive, breakfast is waiting for them. Before we implemented the program, we were serving an average of 550 breakfasts per day at the five sites; we are now serving over 1400 per day. We have seen lots of successes with the program: fewer tardies and absentees, and better behavior as students are no longer complaining about being hungry. Our program was recently highlighted by Kansas State Department of Education during National School Breakfast Week. We are very excited because now other districts across Kansas are coming to visit our program to learn from our success.

We are now looking at starting second chance breakfast at our secondary schools. This will allow students another opportunity to get breakfast between 1st and 2nd period. We have found that many students miss out on school breakfast because they arrive late or are not hungry first thing in the morning. We are hoping to increase participation by offering this option.

We also participate in summer feeding. We provide breakfast and lunch at our five summer school sites and lunch at our two open sites. At the open sites any student between the ages of 1-18 can come and receive a free lunch. We serve an average of 1,200 lunches and 700 breakfasts per day.

Implementing and expanding access to these critical school meal programs has helped our district to remain financially sound while providing the nutrition that is vital to our students. Even before the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) became law, school nutrition professionals across Kansas have been working hard to improve the nutrition of school menus. In our district we offer unlimited fruits and vegetables, serve whole grains and are meeting our limits on calories and unhealthy fats, while reducing sodium.

However, we are facing many challenges. Since the implementation of the new requirements, we are seeing a decline in our participation. Students are now bringing meals from home. At our elementary schools, participation has dropped by more than 9%. At the secondary schools our number of reimbursable meals has increased by 8% as some students shifted from eating a la carte to choosing school meals. However, many other students stopped purchasing our foods altogether, so overall participation and revenue has dropped.

Almost all of the students leaving the lunch program are our paid students. If this trend continues, the school cafeteria will no longer be a place where all our students go to receive the nutrition they need, but rather a place where poor students go to get their free meals. We have worked for years to fight the stigma associated with the free and reduced meal participation, so it is heartbreaking to see our progress decline.

Many districts across Kansas have students leaving the program for a variety of reasons. For example, the HHFKA's paid lunch equity mandate forces many schools to raise lunch prices. Many of our families do not qualify for meals assistance, however they are struggling financially. I was visiting with a little girl at one of our elementary schools and she shared with me that now she can only choose a couple of days a week to eat with us. This trend is likely to persist as we continue to raise prices. Many of our paid families will no longer be able to afford to eat with us, and the financial losses to our program may force us to cut staff, further impacting the community.

Because of the Smart Snacks in School implementation, we have seen huge declines in a la carte sales. We are estimating a loss of over \$700,000 in a la carte revenue due to the new regulations. We relied very heavily on this source of income. Items such as our fresh-to-go salads had to be taken off the menu because the small amounts of meat, cheese and salad dressings did not meet the sodium and fat requirements. To make our sub sandwich meet the requirement, we had to shrink their size, remove the cheese and switch to whole grain bread. This was a very popular a la carte item, and now we sell very few. We can, however, serve diet soda, sugar free gum, and Pop-Tarts. We have chosen not to sell these items, but this illustrates how the regulations do not always make sense. Allowing items permitted to be served as part of a reimbursable meal to also be sold a la carte would increase the healthy options available to our students.

Despite our best efforts to make meals more appealing, we are struggling with student acceptance of new options, particularly whole grain items. Many schools in Kansas have been challenged to find whole grain rich tortillas, pizza crust, biscuits, pasta, crackers and other specialty items that appeal to our students. We can complete a waiver to return to the 2012 requirement that half of grains offered must be whole grain rich, instead of all grains, but this waiver is only good thru the 2015-16 school year. I believe that this should be made permanent, since the Dietary Guidelines for Americans allows for the consumption of some refined grains.

Kansas schools are also concerned about sodium requirements. We are asking to maintain the Target 1 sodium level reductions and suspend implementation of further targets. The Institute of Medicine warned that making further reductions will present major challenges and may not even be possible. If the reductions continue we will be serving healthy children meals that are at a therapeutic low sodium diet level.

Every student must now take a fruit or vegetable with their meals, whether they intend to eat it or not. As a result, we have seen an increase in good food going to waste in our schools, particularly in our breakfast in the classroom programs. We have always encouraged our students to choose fruits and vegetables, and have even distributed free samples along with stickers that say "I Tried It" to encourage students to eat them. But forcing students to take fruits and vegetables turns a healthy choice into a negative experience. Encourage and educate, instead of require, is always the best option.

Olathe's school meal program is self-supporting and operates on a tight budget. We must cover our supply costs, salaries, benefits, workers comp, insurance, utilities, equipment maintenance, software, delivery trucks and district indirect costs. We are left with a little over \$1 to spend on the food for each lunch tray. Imagine going to the grocery store and all you have is \$5 to spend on a meal for your family of four, and that meal must include milk, fruits, vegetables and a healthy entrée. Could you do it every single day of the week? That is what we are expected to do.

My involvement in the School Nutrition Association of Kansas has given me the opportunity to meet with school nutrition professional all across Kansas and Missouri. I have witnessed their accomplishments and their challenges. Some districts have been able to overcome many of the challenges under the new requirements – particularly those with very high free and reduced price eligibility, which provides higher meal reimbursements, access to federal grants and programs, and higher student participation rates.

However, many districts like Olathe are struggling both from reduced revenue from declining participation and the higher costs of preparing meals that meet the requirements. We don't have access to many federal assistance grants and programs.

A colleague recently shared that for the first time he is projecting his program will end the year in the red. This district has a very low percentage of free and reduced students and relied heavily on their a la carte sales. That is why it is vital to allow flexibility, so all School Nutrition programs can be successful for the students and families we serve.

There is a lot of negative press about School Nutrition Programs asking for flexibility; to me this is very hurtful. I have spent over 20 years starting programs, ensuring that our students are receiving the benefits that they need, getting student input and promoting healthy eating. I have worked a lot of hours with little pay. I do it because it is important. I also have a responsibility to make sure that our program is financially sound so we do not have to rely on our district to help fund us. We are only asking for a little flexibility to ensure all School Nutrition Programs are successful. Have faith in the knowledge and desire that all school nutrition professionals want the very best for America's children. After all they are our children and grandchildren too.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before the Committee. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.