

Senate Agriculture Committee Hearing
A National Priority: The Importance of Child Nutrition Programs to our Nation's Health,
Economy and National Security
Testimony from Yolanda Stanislaus, Principal, Francis Scott Key Middle School
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Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Cochran, and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to share my experience and views on the importance of child nutrition programs like school breakfast and school lunch.

My name is Yolanda Stanislaus and I am the Principal at Francis Scott Key Middle School in Silver Spring, Maryland.

When I think about this issue of school nutrition from the perspective of a principal and a parent of both a middle-school and an elementary-aged child, the benefits of universal or free and reduced meals programs are obvious. In addition, I was a child of two working class parents who worked tirelessly to clothe, feed and nurture five children. As a child, I participated in the meal program at my school. I recall looking forward to going to school every day and wondering what would be served for breakfast and lunch. I can testify, firsthand, that the school meal program had a positive impact on my life and learning.

There are children in classrooms all over this nation – in our cities, in the suburbs and in communities – who are coming to school extremely eager to learn. In order for students to learn at high levels, they must be prepared and ready to concentrate by starting their day off with a nutritious breakfast.

The numbers show that one out of five school-aged children struggle with hunger in this country. I can tell you that, on a more personal level, I have over 65 percent of my students who receive free and reduced breakfast and lunch daily and are still struggling with not having enough to eat at home. I can also tell you that this makes it harder for them to learn. I am not alone. There are teachers and principals all over this country who will tell you the same thing. There are children in classrooms all over this nation – in our cities and in the suburbs who are coming to school too hungry to learn. In some cases, the nutritious school breakfast and school lunch are the only meals students have on a daily basis.

Children who consistently do not get enough to eat go to the nurse more often, have trouble focusing on the lessons, which often result in off-task behavior and difficulties with sharing their best thinking on tests. Research shows that students who do get enough nutrition on a daily basis feel better, learn more, develop good eating habits, and grow up stronger.

We spend so much time, money and thought in this nation around educating our children. How do we improve test scores? What do we need to do to make sure students graduate? And there are some wonderful programs and innovations to educate our kids, but if they're too hungry to learn, we've lost before we've even begun.

There are two really key times I see hunger as a wide-spread problem: in the mornings and at the

start of the school year. For many low-income students, their key nutrition comes from school meals. Without school breakfast and school lunch, these students would not get the nutrition they need.

You can really see that in the morning. I have seen students come to school and they haven't eaten since lunch the day before. They're irritable, they can't focus, and they are only able to think about when they're going to eat. I am grateful that my school has the universal free breakfast program. This program enables all of my students to receive a nutritious breakfast and start their day off right!

Another danger time is over summer vacation. Students do not get school meals when school is out of session. You can see a real difference at the start of the school year between the students who had enough to eat over the break and the ones who struggled. The ones who may not have been getting consistent meals are more stressed out, they take longer to get into the swing of the school year, they've forgotten more from the year before. It makes a real difference in their progress.

As a Principal, I see and hear stories that show the impact of these programs every day. I've heard from a principal who told me about a little girl who would cry when we she got out early for a snow day because she knew she wouldn't get lunch. She also had a lot of trouble focusing on her work on Monday mornings, because she didn't really eat regular meals over the weekend and all she could think about was finally getting food at lunchtime. Another teacher in DC said really only has two full effective days to teach: Wednesdays and Thursdays. Mondays and Tuesdays are lost because of the hunger from the weekend and on Fridays most of the students can't concentrate because they are filled with anxiety and aggravation, knowing the weekend is coming and that means not enough food at home.

The nonprofit organization No Kid Hungry and the consulting firm Deloitte conducted a study in 2012 to analyze the impact of school breakfast on a child's ability to learn. Their research focused primarily on what happens when students from low-income families get school breakfast every day. The research found that when students ate school breakfast, they scored 17.5% higher on math tests and missed fewer days of school each year. Higher attendance and higher test scores are closely tied to graduation rates – students who come to class and get better grades are 20% more likely to graduate from high school. This has a huge potential impact on their futures. High school graduates are more likely to find better employment, make higher salaries and become self-sufficient. This research demonstrates that the simple act of ensuring children have access to school breakfast has a dramatic impact on their lives.

Thank you members of the Committee for listening to my story here today. I see firsthand every single day how child nutrition programs are impacting the lives of my students at Francis Scott Key Middle School and I appreciate the attention you are bringing to this very important issue.