

July 27, 2022

The Honorable Robert C. Scott
Chair
U.S. House Education and Labor Committee
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Suzanne Bonamici
Chair
U.S. House Education and Labor Committee
Civil Rights and Human Services Subcommittee
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Virginia Foxx
Ranking Member
House Education and Labor Committee
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Russ Fulcher
Ranking Member
U.S. House Education and Labor Committee
Civil Rights and Human Services Subcommittee
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairs Scott and Bonamici and Ranking Members Foxx and Fulcher,

On behalf of the 25 undersigned organizations, we applaud the House Committee on Education & Labor for its Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) bill, the Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act.

CNR presents an opportunity to make robust, critical improvements to the child nutrition programs that serve tens of millions of children annually. Congress has not passed a CNR bill since the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA), which was called “one of the most important national obesity prevention policy achievements in recent decades” by the Harvard University T.H. Chan School of Public Healthⁱ. It updated national nutrition standards for meals, snacks, and beverages to align with the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, strengthened required policies at the local level through local wellness policies, increased access to free meals, and improved meal financing and technical assistance for schools. The Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act not only builds on the success of the HHFKA but builds on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and is being introduced at a critical time when children need access to healthy food and nutrition services to mitigate the impact from the pandemic. **We urge you to pass this bill expeditiously.**

Among many important investments, the Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act expands free access to healthy school meals for children in high-need schools and provides additional food assistance in the summer months (summer EBT) and for children in full day care. The bill also increases the lunch reimbursement rate and provides breakfast commodity assistance. School meals are the healthiest source of food for children, and at the end of the summer millions of children will lose automatic access to free meals that have been available to them since the onset of the pandemic. This bill will help keep nutrition and food insecurity at bay.

Further, the Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act eliminates cruel “lunch shaming” policies like receiving a cold meal or a stamp on the child’s hand for past-due meal balances. These provisions not only enable children to consistently access healthy, nutritious food during school, but they help relieve the financial burden put on the programs.

The Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act protects and strengthens the evidence-based process on setting nutrition standards to ensure children get the healthy foods they need to learn and thrive. Specifically, the bill requires an update to the nutrition standards for breakfast and lunch, snacks and beverages, and summer meals. Further, the bill provides \$3 million annually through a newly established technical

assistance grant program to help schools get the support needed to provide healthy meals to students. As part of this, the USDA will focus on targeted technical assistance that delivers more intensive and personalized training for school food authorities that require additional support.

The benefits of school nutrition standards are clear. The USDA’s School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study (SNMCS), the only nationally representative study that assessed the nutritional quality and costs of producing school meals before and after implementation of the HHFKA, found that the nutritional quality of meals increased by 40 percent, program participation was higher the healthier the meal, and plate waste did not change, among other key findings.ⁱⁱ Additional studies have documented the efficacy of the updated nutrition standards with respect to meals servedⁱⁱⁱ and consumed.^{iv} School food authorities in many ways are still feeling the impacts of the pandemic, and additional support is imperative to help them transition to the new normal while still providing healthier school meals.

The bill also requires a study on meal times and establishes a task force to issue subsequent best practices and guidance in conjunction with the Department of Education. Most students do not have time to eat their school meals and few states and schools set minimum standards. Adequate meal times can ensure proper nutritional intake and reduce food waste.

The Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act also makes critical investments and program improvements in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), including an expansion of postpartum and child eligibility, steps to continue remote certification options and otherwise streamline program access beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, and new investments in WIC’s successful Breastfeeding Peer Counselor Program.

Finally, the bill expands upon or establishes new grant programs that support kitchen equipment and infrastructure, scratch cooking, plant-based meals, food waste, and farm to school.

These investments are critical to supporting children’s health and can help ensure millions more children will have the nutrition they need to learn, grow, and thrive. We urge the Committee and then the House to pass this legislation and encourage the Senate to move swiftly on its CNR bill.

Sincerely,

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

American Academy of Pediatrics

American Heart Association

American Public Health Association

Balanced

Center for Science in the Public Interest

DC Greens

First Focus Campaign for Children

Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network

Healthy School Food Maryland

Healthy Schools Campaign

International Fresh Produce Association

Kentucky Youth Advocates

Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy

Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest

Nourish Colorado

Project Bread

Real Food for Kids

Save the Children

Society of Behavioral Medicine

UnidosUS

Trust for America's Health

Urban School Food Alliance

UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health

Voices for Georgia's Children

ⁱ Gortmaker SL, Wang YC, Long MW, et al. Three Interventions that Reduce Childhood Obesity Are Projected to Save More Than They Cost to Implement. *Health Aff.* 2015;34:1932-9

ⁱⁱ Fox MK, Gearan E. *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study Summary of Findings*. U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. April 2019. https://The USDA-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/SNMCS_Summary-Findings.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Johnson DB, Podrabsky M, Rocha A, et al. Effect of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act on the Nutritional Quality of Meals Selected by Students and School Lunch Participation Rates. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2016;170:e153918.

^{iv} Schwartz MB, Henderson KE, Read M, et al. New School Meal Regulations Increase Fruit Consumption and Do Not Increase Total Plate Waste. *Child Obes.* 2015;11:242-7.