



EVENT BRIEF

HOUSE EDUCATION AND LABOR COMMITTEE HEARING ON FEDERAL CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS

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On Tuesday, March 2, 2010, the House Education and Labor Committee held a hearing on strengthening the federal nutrition and school meal programs through the upcoming reauthorization of federal programs that address child nutrition. Improving federal child nutrition programs is one of the four pillars of First Lady Michelle Obama's recently announced "Let's Move" campaign to combat childhood obesity.

WITNESSES

- Dora R. Rivas, President, School Nutrition Association, Executive Director of Food and Child Nutrition Services, Dallas Independent School District
- Carolyn L. Morrison, President, National Child and Adult Care Food Program Forum; CEO, Child Development Services, Inc.
- Kiran Saluja, Deputy Director, Public Health Foundation Enterprises, Inc.
- Lucy Gettman, Director, Federal Programs National School Boards Association

MEMBERS PRESENT

Chairman George Miller (D-CA) and Ranking Member John Kline (R-MN); Representatives Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY), Phil Roe (R-TN), Bobby Scott (D-VA), Marcia Fudge (D-OH), Jared Polis (D-CO), Judy Chu (D-CA), Dale Kildee (D-MI), Rush Holt (D-NJ), and Carol Shea-Porter (D-NH).

OPENING STATEMENTS & DISCUSSION

This hearing is one element of the Committee's effort to reauthorize federal child nutrition programs. Chairman George Miller (D-CA) opened the hearing with remarks on the launch of First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" program to end childhood obesity. He gave a brief overview of the program, which includes 4 pillars: 1) Involving parents in nutrition and exercise efforts; 2) Improving access and lowering the cost of healthy foods; 3) Increasing the level of exercise children get; and 4) Improving the nutritional value of school lunches. Ranking Member John Kline's (R-MN) opening remarks supported local planning in future endeavors to ensure any improvements to

nutrition programs take into account regional preferences. He cautioned against excessive federal intervention, saying, “One report from the Institute of Medicine [that] concluded that radical changes might actually undermine participation in the school lunch program... If schoolchildren are not satisfied with the taste of foods served in school meals, participation in school meal programs is likely to decrease.”

WITNESS STATEMENTS

Dora R. Rivas

Dora R. Rivas, President of the School Nutrition Association, suggested federal school lunch reauthorization efforts focus on two priorities: 1) Expanding access to school lunch programs; and 2) Improving the nutritional content of school lunches. To improve access to free school lunches, Rivas recommended a move toward direct certification of schools to allow community eligibility in high poverty areas. This would eliminate the need for children’s parents to individually fill out school lunch applications. Rivas also expressed support for the Healthy Start Act sponsored by Rep. Stephanie Herseth-Sandline (D-SD). She urged the closing of loopholes that allow funding set aside for food to be used for other purposes. To improve nutritional content, Rivas recommended increased reimbursement levels. She asked for support for legislation that would strengthen the Agriculture Secretary’s ability to enforce and regulate state implementation of the guidelines enumerated in the most recent national nutrition standards.

Carolyn L. Morrison

Carolyn L. Morrison, President of the National Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Forum and CEO of Child Development Services, Inc. spoke about Child Nutrition Programs (specifically CACFP) in before- and after-school facilities. Morrison recommended expanding access to nutrition programs by giving childcare providers (in both child-care programs and family child care homes) the option to serve a third meal. Legislators could enable this by reducing the CACFP area eligibility test from 50% to 40%. The federal afterschool, summer nutrition, and child care food programs allow sites to receive funds for meals and snacks based on area income criteria without individually documenting each child’s household income. If a high enough percentage of children in the area are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, then the site receives a standard reimbursement for all of the children. She also recommended updating the CACFP’s nutritional standards to meet updated guidelines. Morrison also suggested enhancing meal reimbursements for food vendors, and noted that many meal sponsors leave the program because the cost of paperwork and other administrative duties is too high. Morrison said reimbursement should include training costs, and explained the benefits of developing online nutritional training for caregivers so they can meet licensing requirements even if they live in rural areas. Finally, Morrison expressed strong support for the Access to Nutritious Meals for Young Children Act (S. 2749), sponsored by Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY).

Kiran Saluja

Kiran Saluja, Deputy Director of Public Health Foundation Enterprises, Inc., focused on her work with the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. She presented an argument based on the notion that the nation can protect against 15-30% childhood obesity by ensuring children are breastfed from birth to at least 6 months. To that end,

she asked legislators to direct Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) to set the breastfeeding fruit and vegetable cash value voucher for the breastfeeding package at \$12 vs. \$10 for all other women. This may not seem like much, she said, but the extra \$2 is an extra incentive to breastfeed. Saluja also asked for more time to help mothers by extending WIC eligibility certification for children (40% of WIC participants) to one year. Saluja then referred to what she considered unsupported nutrition programs, active infant formula marketing, and poor community and workplace support. She asked Congress to “think outside the box” to get hospitals not to sabotage breastfeeding by separating children from their mothers at birth and starting babies on formula at the hospital.

Lucy Gettman

Lucy Gettman, Director of Federal Programs at the National School Boards Association, talked about local control in nutrition initiatives. She cited a number of programs across the nation to illustrate the growth of local initiatives. Gettman asserted that federal programs must allow for local differences in tastes and resources, and said local authorities should be able to shape the content of their programs. Related to reauthorization, she recommended recognizing local and school district authorities’ importance; refraining from imposing additional regulations and mandates outside of the federal subsidized school lunch program; adequately reimbursing states for providing school lunch services; supporting school districts and communities that are actively playing a role in improving nutrition through grant programs; and ensuring adequate resources are available for program, training, and local initiatives.

MEMBER QUESTIONS

Chairman Miller thanked the panel for their testimony and asked a question about why food providers in Los Angeles were leaving CACFP. Morrison said that the providers were not being compensated enough for doing administrative paperwork in order for continued service to be viable. She attributed this to the decrease in reimbursement rates for administration last year. Miller also asked Rivas about meeting the guidelines for nutrition. Rivas said that having the Secretary of Agriculture enforce those guidelines would help ensure they are adopted as well as lower the cost of providing lunch by limiting variables.

Ranking Member Kline restated his appreciation for local control and asked how to involve parents. Gettman said parents play a critical role, which is why they often serve on school boards. She also discussed the role of local school district initiatives to magnify parental knowledge and involvement. Kline also asked about whether the nutritional guidelines should include all food related in any way to the school, including bake sales. Rivas said her organization supports local control as long as it’s backed by strong science. She urged Congress to eliminate the distinction of “time and place” to allow for a consistent, healthy food message throughout the campus, at all times.

Representative McCarthy, who worked for over 30 years as a nurse, asked about the hurdles to promoting breastfeeding in the WIC program. Saluja said addressing the institutions that promote anti-breastfeeding messages, particularly hospitals, is an urgent challenge. McCarthy also talked about the need to promote the connection between nutrition and improved academic achievement.

Representative Roe talked about the issue of helping mothers who are going back to work and still breastfeeding. He also expressed sympathy for increasing reimbursement for school meals. Saluja said that going back to work should not be a deterrent to breastfeeding, as WIC includes funding for breast pumps.

Representative Scott asked about successful farm to school programs that sell fresh produce to local schools. Rivas said there are a number of successful programs across the country and recommended they be expanded. Representative Rush Holt (D-NJ) interjected to note that H.R. 4710 would amend the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act to award grants to eligible entities for farm to school programs. Scott also asked if it was more expensive to provide healthy meals. Rivas said it costs significantly more to offer healthy meals. Scott also asked about school breakfast programs and their significance. Rivas said students are more attentive and mentally alert when they have had breakfast.

Representative Fudge talked about the healthcare costs attributable to obesity, and asked if there needed to be a minimum standard of nutrition for all foods in order to protect the integrity of school lunch programs. Rivas repeated the need to repeal “time and place” limitations. She also asked if lowering the CACFP area eligibility test from 50% to 40% would positively affect urban areas. Morrison said it would likely have a greater affect in urban areas.

Representative Polis asked about encouraging vegetarian options. Rivas said that while these options are often healthier, many students do not respond well to vegetarian options. She also said that without increasing the demand for vegetarian meals, the meals will continue to be prohibitively expensive. She recommended increasing the reimbursement levels to offset the additional cost.

CONCLUSION

For more information on the hearing, including a webcast of the hearing and testimony from witnesses, visit: <http://edlabor.house.gov/hearings/2010/03/improving-childrens-health-str.shtml>.