



HOUSE EDUCATION AND LABOR COMMITTEE EXAMINES THE *IMPROVING NUTRITION FOR AMERICA'S CHILDREN ACT*

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On Thursday, July, 1 the House Education and Labor Committee held a hearing to examine the *Improving Nutrition for America's Children Act* (H.R. 5504), aimed at expanding access to nutritious meals year round, both in and out of school, for low-income children.

WITNESSES

PANEL 1:

- The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack, Secretary of Agriculture, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Washington, D.C.

PANEL 2:

- Tom Colicchio, Chef and Restaurateur, New York, NY
- Robert Rector, Senior Research Fellow, Welfare and Family Issues, The Heritage Foundation, Washington, DC
- James D. Weill, President, Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), Washington, DC
- Dr. Eduardo J. Sanchez, Vice President and Chief Medical Officer, Blue Cross and Blue Shield Texas, Richardson, TX
- Major General Paul D. Monroe, U.S. Army (Ret.), Executive Advisory Council Mission: Readiness, Berkeley, CA

MEMBERS PRESENT

Chairman George Miller (D-CA) and Ranking Member John Kline (R-MN); and Representatives Dale Kildee (D-MI), Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY), Bobby Scott (D-VA), Joe Courtney (D-CT), David Loebsack (D-IA), John Tierney (D-MA), Dennis Kucinich (D-OH), Dina Titus (D-NV), Yvette Clarke (D-NY), Judy Chu (D-CA), Bill Cassidy (R-LA), Brett Guthrie (R-KY), Todd Platts (R-PA), Michael Castle (R-DE), Judy Biggert (R-IL) and Glenn Thompson (R-PA).

OPENING STATEMENTS & DISCUSSION

Chairman George Miller (D-CA) opened the hearing by sharing familiar statistics: nearly 1 in 3 children are obese and 16 million children are hungry. “If we do nothing, if we allow these children’s health to deteriorate, and jeopardize their success in school, we compromise their ability to grow into healthy, productive adults,” the Chairman stated. He also highlighted four specific areas H.R. 5504 aims to improve. This includes: 1) streamlining and increasing access to nutritious foods during the school day; 2) improving food safety in schools; 3) increasing the reimbursement rate of school meals and 4) providing year-round access to nutritious foods. Miller noted that this is far from the first time in history that schools have been asked to address a “national health crisis,” alluding to the education students received regarding the hazards of tobacco use and not wearing seatbelts. He claimed that students learned the facts and shared them with their parents and that transaction resulted in less risky behaviors vis a vis these issues. He argued that nutrition is no different. “The federal child nutrition programs provide us with a tremendous opportunity to help change children’s lives and the future of this country by not just feeding children healthier meals but by teaching them about the importance of healthy choices.” H.R. 5504 aims to educate children about nutrition, and in turn, children will share what they learn with parents to create a better understanding of food and nutrients.

While **Ranking Member Kline (R-MN)** recognized the importance of addressing the needs of the millions of hungry and obese American children, he was reluctant to accept \$8 billion in deficit spending to pay to meet these needs. He supports strengthening and modernizing existing programs at low cost, but suggested that the current economic times are not best suited for creating new programs without providing offsets. He elaborated, “Let me be clear: our child nutrition programs are a worthy investment, and one we will continue to prioritize. But at a time of record debts and deficits, creating new programs for green cafeterias and federalizing our local wellness policies and nutrition standards seems fiscally irresponsible.” Kline was clear that his focus is feeding children, not wellness policy. He stated, “...I hope we do not allow an important discussion about nutritional science and wellness policy reporting to detract from our larger obligation to prevent hunger and improve child nutrition responsibly.”

WITNESS STATEMENTS

Panel 1

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack

Secretary Vilsack began his remarks by declaring that he would not follow his written testimony and, instead, wanted to “speak from the heart.” When President Obama appointed Vilsack Secretary of Agriculture, his first charge to him was to improve child nutrition, and Vilsack is determined to do just that. He offered support of several improvements made by H.R. 5504 including greater participation in school breakfast; reconnecting with local farmers; providing consistent nutrition, including what is found in school vending machines; and providing equipment adequate for preparing healthy meals, such as vegetable steamers instead of deep-fryers. Vilsack asserted that these and

other improvements are necessary so that children can learn and be competitive. He added that by adopting H.R. 5504, it will help lower healthcare costs and improve national security by increasing the number of physically-fit youth who may qualify for the armed forces. Vilsack stated there is no more important issue than nutritiously and adequately feeding America's youth. He urged Congress not delay in passing the bill and declared child nutrition a top priority for the USDA. He concluded by saying that he is dedicated to finding offsets to promote the expedited passage of H.R. 5504.

MEMBER QUESTIONS

Chairman Miller asked about the cost relationship between paid meals and the subsidies schools receive. Vilsack responded that, because schools are struggling and food budgets are likely to be cut, about 80 percent of subsidies are applied toward paid meals.

Ranking Member Kline stressed that there is a solid bipartisan agreement that child nutrition must be improved, and the only disagreement is about the cost. A number of Members echoed Kline's sentiment regarding the cost. **Congressman Castle** inquired about the kinds of oversight in place to monitor what is being served in schools. Vilsack explained that USDA guidelines for schools are based on an Institute of Medicine study that calls for the reduction of sodium and high caloric content. Additionally,

Congresswoman Biggert and **Congressman Cassidy** expressed concerns that the guidelines may be too limiting for some cultures. Vilsack was certain the all cultures could find ways to prepare foods according to the guidelines.

Panel 2:

Tom Colicchio

Tom Colicchio began his testimony by supporting H.R. 5504 and voicing a sense of urgency that offsets be found. He made several references to "thinking adults," inferring that adults should do what is best for children. As Congress has the opportunity to vastly improve what children in need are eating, he posed this question, "...how many of you here today would be content to let the bulk of your children's daily calories come from soda, chips, or branded fast food? And yet, we are sitting by and allowing that to happen for families who are struggling and relying on us to do better." He declared his explicit support for such improvements in H.R. 5504 as "significantly rais[ing] the quality and variety of what schools can afford;" broadening area eligibility requirements for summer food programs; and expanding direct certification. In conclusion, Colicchio reiterated the need for this bill to become law so America's children can be productive citizens in a global economy.

Robert Rector

Robert Rector provided an alternative perspective on how to address current child nutrition challenges. He urged that funding child nutrition must not be considered individually, but in comparison to the other programs in which many low-income families participate. According to Rector, around 14 million of the lowest-income families with children will receive \$33,000 in welfare spending in FY 2011. As a result, he urged the Committee to determine the effectiveness of the 70 other programs aimed at low-income families before increasing the nation's debt with more programs to benefit this same group of families. Additionally, he argued that there are no scientific studies

with a control group that demonstrate any significant positive impact of school breakfast programs. He also claimed that food insecurity does not affect many children, stating that in 2008, only 1 in 150 children missed one meal in a month due to a lack of food in their house. He concluded his testimony by stating, “there is little or no evidence suggesting that government spending on child nutrition programs can be a cost-effective means of reducing obesity.” He called for scientific research and studies to be conducted before any more money is spent.

James D. Weill

In contrast to Rector, James D. Weill argued that there are numerous studies that demonstrate marked positive effects of school breakfast and other nutrition programs and included recent titles of this research in his written testimony. He also argued that 1 in 5 or 17 million kids are food insecure, once again contradicting Rector. Weill stressed the importance of out-of-school food programs: “The out-of-school time nutrition programs [summer food and afterschool food] draw hungry children into school-based and community-based programs that keep them safe and engaged; reduce obesity; and provide basic nutrients at key times when children can’t get them from school meals programs.” In addition to hunger, Weill explained that a quarter of two to five year olds and one-third of school-age children are overweight or obese. Hunger and obesity are not mutually exclusive. A child who is obese, eating mostly high calorie foods, may still be hungry because they are lacking nutrients that fulfill their growing body’s needs. Weill offered his support for a number of improvements found in H.R. 5504 including providing competitive grants to promote the School Breakfast Program; expanding the afterschool meal program so that, through the National School Lunch Program, children can receive meals after school, during the summer and on holidays; and allowing child care facilities to provide an extra meal or snack to children who are in their care for more than eight hours a day. He also called for the national expansion of several pilot programs included in H.R. 5504. In conclusion, Weill stated, that H.R. 5504 will “ensure significant movement towards the goals we all have of ending child hunger and dramatically reducing childhood obesity.”

Dr. Eduardo J. Sanchez

Dr. Eduardo J. Sanchez echoed other panelists’ concerns regarding obesity, stating that, “Obesity threatens the health of our young people, their future potential and our nation’s global competitiveness.” He also concurred that healthy children are the key to America’s national security. He argued that because a majority of children attend public schools, it is an excellent place to address nutrition and obesity issues and “provides a natural setting to promote healthy habits.” Nearly ten percent of all medical costs in the U.S., he stated, are related to obesity. He added that more than 4,000 children each year are diagnosed with Type II Diabetes, which until recently, was referred to as “Adult Onset Diabetes.” In Dr. Sanchez’s written testimony, he endorsed the enhanced local wellness policies in H.R. 5504. He concluded by expressing the need to pass the bill immediately.

Major General Paul D. Monroe

Major General Paul D. Monroe reiterated previous witness’ points that improving childhood nutrition and decreasing obesity is a matter of national security. He added that

there had been a security connection to the health of the nation's children prior to 1946, when the Nation School Lunch Act was passed, in response to concerns of malnourishment. He stated that while currently the military is reaching its recruitment goals, with only 25 percent of young people eligible to enlist, it will soon be impossible to continue meeting these goals. Monroe noted that the current nutrition standards have been in place since 1995, and he stated, "We are long overdue for an update." He urged it is imperative to act now so that children "grow up fit to defend our nation."

MEMBER QUESTIONS

Chairman Miller allowed other Members to begin the round of questioning first, and **Congressman Scott (D-VA)** asked Dr. Sanchez about the link between hunger and obesity. Dr. Sanchez explained that, in America, "hunger looks different" than what most people envision. Healthy foods tend to be expensive so low-income families cannot afford to supply them, but healthy foods address and improve both issues. Congressman Scott also inquired about direct certification benefits and the proposed reimbursement rate. Direct certification, Weill responded, will provide greater access to children who are already eligible for the programs, but for one reason or another have fallen through the cracks. In reference to the reimbursement rate, Weill commented that six cents is not enough to cover the costs schools must spend to provide healthy meals.

Congressman Tierney (D-MA) inquired about summer and afterschool programs. According to Weill, on average, only 16 out of 100 kids who are eligible for such programs are receiving meals through summer programs. Weill added that dinner should also be provided to children who participate in afterschool programs that continue into the evening hours. **Ranking Member Kline** provided Rector with an opportunity to further explain his claim that there are no studies relating to benefits of child nutrition programs. Rector highlighted the lack of control groups in existing studies, and, therefore, are not scientifically valid. In response, it was stated that perhaps the required standards for pharmaceutical studies are not the most appropriate standards to examine child nutrition. **Congressman Thompson (R-PA)** inquired about the role of parents. Major General Monroe asserted that parents must be educated about nutrition in order to provide it for their children. Finally, **Congresswoman Chu (D-CA)** asked if the lowest performing turnaround schools should be automatically certified to provide free and reduced price meals. Direct certification for those those schools would be efficient and beneficial to the students, stated Weill.

CONCLUSION

To adjourn the hearing, Chairman Miller announced there will be a markup of the bill the week after the House returns from the July 4th recess. For more information including a recording of the hearing, go to: <http://edlabor.house.gov/hearings/2010/07/hr5504-improving-nutrition-for.shtml>.