

## **Statement Before the Institute of Medicine Committee on Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools**

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Derek Miller - Professional Staff Member, Senate Committee on Agriculture  
Nutrition and Forestry

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to provide some framing comments from Senator Harkin regarding the task before you. Let me also thank the committee members for agreeing to participate in this effort. Senator Harkin is aware that the participation of committee members is an unpaid and requires significant sacrifices of time and energy. Senator Harkin thanks you for your contributions.

As the committee is no doubt aware, there has been considerable recent interest in the matter of school nutrition and school nutrition standards. Many individual schools, school districts, and state legislatures, as well as Congress, have been actively debating the matter of school nutrition standards.

As they consider school nutrition standards, they ask first, whether such standards are appropriate. Second, they ask if they likely to be effective in promoting child health and preventing diet-related chronic disease and childhood obesity. Finally, if the answer to the first two questions is an affirmative one, they ask what such standards should take.

Obviously, adjudicating the first two questions is beyond the charge of this committee. However, on the third point, what shape such standards should take, this committee has an important contribution to make.

Before I proceed, let me clarify first that Senator Harkin's fundamental interest here is nutrition standards for foods offered in competition with school meals such as foods offered through school vending machines, snack bars, and a la carte lines, rather than federally-reimbursed schools meals offered through the National School Lunch Program or the School Breakfast Program.

Many of the people and public bodies that have considered school nutrition standards have been motivated by a desire to take action, but frustrated by a lack of clear guidance on precisely what those standards should be.

As you are probably aware, the Dietary Guidelines for All Americans, which inform the nutrition standards for federally-reimbursed school meals, cannot be easily applied to foods offered through vending machines, snack bars, and a la carte lines. This is because the Dietary Guidelines for All Americans are meant to be applied to consumption patterns that occur over an extended period of time, rather than foods offered and consumed individually. Therefore, the Dietary Guidelines cannot be easily applied to individual food items. As a result, there has been a vacuum of scientific guidance regarding precisely what form nutrition standards should take for competitive foods and how such standards should be applied to individual food items, rather than consumption over time.

Senator Harkin believes that the task of this committee is to provide guidance to interested schools, state legislatures, and other policymakers regarding precisely how to formulate nutrition standards for individual food items to which the Dietary Guidelines for All Americans cannot be easily applied.

The importance and urgency of this task is underscored by new federal law requiring that every American school which participates in the School Lunch or School Breakfast Program must formulate a “local wellness policy” by July 1, 2006. Under these local wellness policies, schools must set nutrition standards for all foods sold in school, including competitive foods.

Considerable amounts of energy have already gone into these local wellness policies. But, at present, these efforts are hampered somewhat by the absence of a single set of criteria put forth by a non-partisan, authoritative scientific body.

This panel has a tremendous opportunity to fill a huge need by formulating such science-based standards. Hopefully, your work will result in the gold standard that is based upon the best science and which has as its starting point and its ending point child health and nutrition.

Because of the growing interest in this matter as well as new federal local wellness policy standards, the job of this committee is not just an academic one. It is Senator Harkin’s hope that the recommendations of this committee do not just gather dust and sit on the shelves of child nutrition experts, doctors, and policymakers. He hopes that this work can be turned into a working set of guidelines and technical assistance upon which schools and policymakers around the nation can draw as they work to set their own guidelines for school foods.

Beyond this general charge, there are a couple of other points that Senator Harkin would like the committee to consider.

First, while this committee is no doubt aware of and will hear about the many political considerations surrounding these issues, Senator Harkin believes that the core recommendations of the committee should not be influenced by these political considerations. Obviously, debates about local control and school decisions, about the potential revenue loss associated with improving the school nutrition environment, and about child and consumer freedom, are a significant part of the broader policy debate. As such, they must all be considered by policymakers who are examining these issues. However, Senator Harkin is very hopeful that this committee will make its core recommendations on the basis of the science alone and then let policymakers weigh the science against other intervening factors.

Second, Senator Harkin would also urge the committee to examine and make recommendations on the issue of Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value. As you may know, USDA currently has limited regulatory authority over competitive foods that are sold in the school lunchroom during the time of meal service. It has chosen to use this authority by defining a very small class of foods as Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value and by prohibiting the sale of these foods in the lunchroom during meal time. This definition is now approximately 30 years old and no longer reflects current nutrition science nor changes in children's dietary intake that have occurred since the definition was first formulated by USDA.

Senator Harkin encourages the committee to look at this outdated and arbitrary definition, which USDA can modify and update without an act of Congress, and to make recommendations regarding how to modernize the definition of Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value to reflect current nutrition sciences and risk factors for children.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about Senator Harkin's expectations for the work of this committee. And thank you once again for your participation in this effort.