

**National Academy of Sciences
Committee on Nutrition Standards for the National
School Lunch and Breakfast Programs
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**On behalf of PTA national President
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First, I would like to thank the committee for inviting me to speak on behalf of the 5.5 million members of the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA). PTA has long sought to improve child nutrition and wellness and prides itself on the instrumental role the organization has played in improvements in child nutrition since PTA's inception in 1897. I would like to mention briefly a few highlights of PTAs work in pursuit of this goal over the years.

Fifty-four years after PTA first petitioned Congress to establish a cabinet-level department focused on health our persistence and commitment helped achieve that goal. The Department of Health, Education and Welfare, now known as the Department of Health and Human Services, was formed in 1953.

In 1923, PTA worked to ensure the provision of hot lunches in schools. In the 1940s and '50s, we were involved in the establishment and expansion of the school milk programs. We also worked to ensure the passage of both the National School Lunch Act and the Child Nutrition Act.

More recently, PTA and our coalition partners fought successfully for the inclusion of language mandating the creation of local school wellness policies in the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004. These wellness policies give parents, students, school nutrition representatives, school board members, school administrators, and the public the opportunity to formulate local policies tailored to the specific needs and capacity of their communities.

I mention these accomplishments not only to underscore PTA's commitment to the well-being of our nation's children, but also to provide an historical context for where we are today. It is important to view the challenges we face currently with a healthy understanding of the confluence of events that has gotten us into our current predicament. By the same token, it is essential that we assess the current conditions with which we are dealing by looking at the entirety of the conditions contributing to the epidemic of childhood obesity and other child health issues instead of taking a piecemeal approach.

While it is the task of this committee to make recommendations about revising the meal patterns and standards used for the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs, these programs must be considered in the context of all available food options students

have during school hours. While it is essential to ensure that the regulations governing the School Lunch and Breakfast programs reflect the current science and health trends, how great an overall effect will it truly have when our students are given the choice to buy unhealthy snacks and sodas from vending machines on school grounds? By the same token, is the nutritional education being provided to students having an impact, when it is undermined consistently by the foods being offered on their schools' a la carte menus? Can we truly begin to tackle the increasing prevalence of childhood obesity without addressing the decline in the availability and emphasis placed upon physical activity in our schools?

Although I am aware that not all of these matters fall under the purview of this committee, it is critical to look realistically at the entire school foods environment. With this in mind, PTA is a strong supporter of the Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act, requiring the USDA to update the nutrition standards for foods sold on school grounds outside of the School Lunch and Breakfast programs. As you well know, the USDA nutrition standards have not been updated since the 1970s and require only that foods sold outside of school meals be of "minimum nutritional value." This outdated view of nutrition no longer makes sense in light of contemporary science, dietary patterns or health standards. The best interests of our children demand that it be modernized.

In addition to the potential challenges created by factors in the school foods environment, there are also positive influences within our schools upon which we can build. The reauthorization of the Farm Bill earlier this year expanded the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable program to schools in every state. This program makes a difference in students' diets by increasing fruit and vegetable consumption, introducing a wider variety of healthy foods to students, creating a healthier school food environment and teaching healthy eating habits through practice rather than strictly through preaching. It is precisely this type of program that provides school nutrition directors with critical tools critical to stem the tide of unhealthy eating habits.

In addition to the surrounding school food environment, school food directors and others tasked with the nutritional care of America's youth are forced to deal with the stark realities of the world around us. However, there are certain steps that can be taken in order to help them in their mission. PTA supports fully increased promotion of universal meals programs, a reduction of the administrative, and paperwork barriers that limit participation.

Furthermore, school meal reimbursements had fallen far behind the costs of production even before our nation's energy costs began to reach such staggering highs. Given current conditions, it is nearly impossible for schools to maintain the high-quality nutrition standards established in law. In fact, the House Education and Labor Committee is scheduled to hold a hearing today on this very matter. There will be opposition to increasing federal spending on school meals programs. PTA believes that an investment in our children now will save us from greater expenditures in the future. The rise in poor nutrition, inactivity, and weight problems is affecting negatively not only

children's health but also their academic achievement. Investing in child nutrition and wellness programs now reduces future expenses for problems associated with poor nutrition and low academic achievement, such as dropping out of school, unemployment, and preventable health problems.

Finally, PTA encourages the involvement of parents in school wellness councils and other committees working to improve school meals programs. Not only is it the right of a parent to be involved in the major decisions affecting their children's health and well-being, but parental involvement has the additional benefit of engaging, and in many cases educating, parents and the surrounding community about the importance of healthy nutrition in the daily lives of their families.

Once again, I would like to thank the committee and all of the other presenters here today for engaging in this topic, which is imperative to the future of not only our children but also our country. Make no mistake, the decisions made in the here and now will reverberate in our schools, our hospitals, our economy, and, most importantly, our homes.