

November 1, 2011

Dear Member of Congress:

We are writing to express in the strongest possible terms our opposition to efforts to derail or subvert the provisions of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 that will quickly and markedly improve school meals, and efforts to derail the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) process to accomplish that goal through regular rule-making.

Just 10 months ago, with significant bipartisan support, Congress told USDA to go through a quick but regular rule-making process in order to accomplish changes that are long overdue to make school meals healthier. That process is looking to current dietary science, informed by Institute of Medicine recommendations. Congress also gave schools added funds to implement the resulting improvements. The law was supported by a broad range of nutrition, provider, industry, labor and advocacy groups.

USDA has been doing what it is supposed to do: it proposed new rules in a timely manner and asked for comment. It received more than 140,000 comments from a broad range of individuals and organizations. USDA is following the standard rule-making process; it is analyzing the comments, making revisions and is on track to issue new rules early next year.

Now special interest groups and some members of Congress are trying to derail the process. They would ignore both the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act and the Administrative Procedure Act. They want to suspend, delay or derail the rules, or give the schools the added funding but water down the requirements. It is imperative that the rule-making process proceed unencumbered by such politics.

USDA must be allowed to complete its work, including making sensible changes to the proposed rules. School meals need to be improved as soon as possible: the current rule-making process will result in more nutritious meals that better support the health and well-being of children being served in the nation's school cafeterias as early as the 2012-2013 school year. Moving away from the legally established process will mean that improvements to the school nutrition standards will be delayed for years, putting the nation's children's health at risk.

Contrary to some arguments (including those asserted by the House Agriculture Appropriations Committee in its report) that the nation can't afford healthier school meals; it is more accurate to say that the nation can't afford not to improve school meals. Poor nutrition leads to a higher risk of obesity and diet-related diseases, and hunger also produces health and educational damage. Affected children perform badly in school and grow up at a distinct disadvantage to their peers. USDA has stated clearly that the rule-making will produce science-based nutrition standards that are practical for schools to implement -- i.e., it will work to resolve any cost problems.

We call on you to oppose any proposals that would derail or otherwise interfere with USDA's work to finalize the school meal rules and improve nutrition in schools, and we urge you to speak out in support of the process to create and implement new improved nutrition standards. Children -- and the nation -- cannot wait any longer for these important changes.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Better Children's Diets  
American Dietetic Association  
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees  
(AFSCME)  
American Public Health Association  
Americans for Democratic Action  
Association of Graduate Programs in Public Health Nutrition  
Association of State & Territorial Public Health Nutrition Directors  
Bread for the World  
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities  
Coalition on Human Needs  
Community Action Partnership  
Community Food Security Coalition  
Congressional Hunger Center  
Feeding America  
First Focus Campaign for Children  
Food Research and Action Center  
Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA)  
League of United Latin American Citizens  
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger  
Migrant Legal Action Program  
National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Council of La Raza  
National WIC Association  
National Women's Law Center  
RESULTS  
School Food FOCUS  
Share Our Strength  
Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior  
The Educational Alliance  
Tufts University Friedman School  
Union for Reform Judaism  
United Fresh Produce Association  
YMCA of the USA