

**LEGISLATIVE HEARING TO REVIEW S. 222,
THE WHOLE MILK FOR HEALTHY KIDS ACT,
AND IMPROVING CHILDREN'S HEALTH**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
**COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY**
UNITED STATES SENATE
ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS
FIRST SESSION

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**LEGISLATIVE HEARING TO REVIEW S. 222,
THE WHOLE MILK FOR HEALTHY KIDS ACT,
AND IMPROVING CHILDREN'S HEALTH**

TUESDAY, APRIL 1, 2025

U.S. SENATE
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10 a.m., in Room 328A, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. John Boozman, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Boozman [presiding], Ernst, Marshall, Tuberville, Justice, Grassley, Fischer, Klobuchar, Bennet, Durbin, Luján, Warnock, Welch, and Schiff.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN BOOZMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM
THE STATE OF ARKANSAS, CHAIRMAN, U.S. COMMITTEE ON
AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY**

Chairman BOOZMAN. Good morning and welcome. It is my privilege to call this hearing to order. I would like to thank our witnesses for taking the time out of their busy schedules to share your expertise and perspectives on the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act, S. 222.

This bill, which would permit schools to offer students whole, reduced, low-fat, and fat-free flavored and unflavored milk, has enjoyed strong bipartisan support in both the House and Senate, including from many Members on this Committee.

Last Congress, the House passed this legislation by an impressive vote of 330–99. I look forward to working with my colleagues on this Committee to make progress on this important bill in the Senate.

We know that America is facing an obesity challenge, and nutrition is under a microscope. When it comes to the diet of children, we know there are a number of health challenges facing young students, including childhood obesity, access, evolving nutrient science, and many others. The school meal programs are key in addressing children's health, by providing nutritious, balanced meals to ensure students have the fuel they need to be successful in the classroom.

School food service directors work tirelessly to meet nutrition standards, stay within tight budgets, and determine what students will actually consume. There is no point in commending ourselves for the nutritious value of school lunches if they wind up in the trash can.

Over the years, we have seen many changes in the nutrition standards, across many different venues. We have discussed and debated requirements for whole grains, sodium, fruits, vegetables, and dairy, within and outside Congress. Equally important is the engagement from everyone working on these programs: State and local officials, parents, teachers, and all who are involved in supplying school meals.

Today's hearing is an excellent opportunity for us to hear from a wide array of experts to examine the important role of milk in school nutrition programs. We are fortunate to have a representative from the Department of Agriculture, along with nutrition science experts, and leaders from both State-level and school districts with on-the-ground experience in implementing school meal programs. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses and putting their advice into action as we continue this work this Congress.

I now turn to Ranking Member Klobuchar for her opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF HON. AMY KLOBUCHAR, U.S. SENATOR FROM
THE STATE OF MINNESOTA**

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you very much. Thank you, Chairman, for holding this hearing. Thanks to our witnesses who have traveled to share their perspectives on child nutrition programs, what is working, and what we can do to improve them.

I have long supported the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act—thank you, Senator Marshall—and this hearing is an important opportunity to underscore the importance of school nutrition and threats to their success. Ensuring kids have access to nutritious foods at school is a win-win, a win for kids, a win for schools, and a win for our farmers who provide healthy and nutritious foods.

I will note there is kind of a perfect storm going on right now with the tariffs, which I oppose, these proposed tariffs, with input costs, with weather, which is not in our control, whether it floods, whether it is tornadoes, and then, of course, with the chaos right now with cuts and with people being terminated and then rehired, with avian flu. When I am out there—I just did a 14-county rural tour, including several small-town town halls with the farmers union, and I really got a sense of where people are coming from. They are not activists. They are regular farmers, ranchers, mostly small farmers, and it is a lot going on.

I would just point out that as one of our witnesses today, Mr. Gorman, has said, the funding that we put into school meals is some of the best money that we spent. Not only do school meal programs reduce hunger and promote learning, they also support our local farmers and ranchers at a time when it is probably the very worst time I have seen in decades, to step away from that, because the economy is getting to be much more volatile than it was a few months ago. That means people are going to need these programs, like the SNAP program. Then you also have the farmers and ranchers that are getting headwinds at them on many different fronts.

Over the last decade we have made significant improvements to child nutrition. The nutrition quality of school lunch and school breakfast has improved, and at the same time we have worked to

streamline school meal programs. Community eligibility has been a tremendous success, eliminating burdensome red tape while increasing the number of schools offering meals. In the 2023–2024 school year, nearly 48,000 schools, with 23.6 million students, participated. Community eligibility has played a key role in allowing Minnesota to offer meals for children. To provide meals to all kids in our State, Minnesota chips in State funds on top of the Federal reimbursements to allow every school to offer meals. As this Committee looks at Federal child nutrition programs we should ensure changes to the programs, improve them rather than take away nutritious foods from kids across the country.

Unfortunately, schools, charities, and food banks across the country are facing a loss of these fresh, nutritious foods because of USDA's recent cancellation of Local Food Purchase Agreement and Local Food for School funds. In Minnesota, for example, schools will lose significant funding for local commodities and farmers, like one livestock operator I heard from, are losing critical domestic markets at the same time when the retaliatory tariffs, as I just noted, are costing farmers and ranchers greatly across global markets.

The cancellation of additional anti-hunger funding will only exacerbate food insecurity. Our Federal nutrition programs are intended to work together, addressing hunger both in school and at home. I led my colleagues in demanding answers about the recent cut to local emergency food providers. If local charities and food pantries cannot meet the needs of the growing number of food-insecure kids, school food programs will be asked to do more to ensure our kids are not going hungry, not less.

In the House, cuts to school meal programs through reconciliation are on the table. As the House Agriculture Committee's \$230 billion cut, likely to nutrition programs like SNAP, would be devastating to child nutrition. SNAP is also our largest child nutrition program, serving 15.5 million children in 2022. Cuts to SNAP will also have a direct impact on school meals. Many kids participating in school meals actually do so through SNAP, so cuts to SNAP are also cuts to school meals. Recent proposals to cut SNAP would have kicked nearly a million kids off child nutrition.

While we can continue to make improvements to our school nutrition programs—and I hope we will have those discussions in the context of a farm bill which we sorely need—we should not ignore the progress that we have made, and we cannot pretend that the cuts that are currently on the table will not stop that progress dead in the tracks. I hope that we can all agree that we should first do no harm, and then build upon what is working.

With that I look very forward to hearing from the witnesses. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you, Senator Klobuchar.

We will now introduce our first witness. Dr. Eve Stoodly serves as the Director of the Nutrition Guidance and Analysis Division at the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion within the Food and Nutrition Service at USDA. Dr. Stoodly has played a key part in the development of Dietary Guidelines for Americans, dating back to 2010, serving in roles at both the USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services. She holds a doctorate in nutrition from Texas Woman's University.

Again, thank you for being here this morning. Dr. Stooddy, you are now recognized for your statement.

STATEMENT OF EVE STOODY, Ph.D., DIRECTOR, NUTRITION GUIDANCE AND ANALYSIS DIVISION, CENTER FOR NUTRITION POLICY AND PROMOTION, USDA, ALEXANDRIA, VA

Dr. STOODY. Thank you, Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and Members of the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you today. It is truly an honor.

As mentioned, I am Dr. Eve Stooddy, the Director of the Nutrition Guidance and Analysis Division at the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion within the Food and Nutrition Service at USDA. I have served at USDA for over 15 years, and have supported the development of the Dietary Guidelines since the 2010 edition. In my current role I serve as a career subject matter expert on the Dietary Guidelines process and lead USDA staff in the development of the Dietary Guidelines with our partners at HHS.

Evidence continues to support dairy as an important part of a healthy dietary pattern, and yet, for about 90 percent of the U.S. population, dairy intakes fall below recommendations. Dietary intake data has shown reductions in intake over time, which sets the stage for nutrient shortfalls, particularly for calcium and vitamin D.

The latest edition of the Dietary Guidelines states that healthy dietary patterns feature dairy, including milk, yogurt, and cheese. The Dietary Guidelines also recommend that most dairy choices should be fat-free or low-fat and with no to little added sugars.

Dairy recommendations have been relatively consistent in the Dietary Guidelines since the first edition in 1980, and more recent editions have evolved to include low-lactose, lactose-free, and soy options.

Regarding current intakes, as I mentioned, 90 percent of the U.S. population does not meet dairy recommendations, and intakes have been declining over time. For example, in adolescents, dairy intake is about a half a cup lower per day now than it was about 20 years ago.

We also have national data that describes how many Americans report drinking milk on any given day. In adolescents, the percent reporting drinking milk was about 75 percent in the 1970's, just under 50 percent in the early 2000's, and the most recent data suggests that about 35 percent of adolescents report drinking milk on any given day.

USDA's school meal programs support the consumption of milk among children. Under current school meal nutrition standards, schools must offer a variety, at least two options of milk, with breakfast and lunch. Schools may currently offer flavored and unflavored low-fat, fat-free, and lactose-free milk. The Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025 would change the permissible milk types that may be offered in school meals to include those recommended by the current Dietary Guidelines—fat-free and low-fat milk—to also include reduced-fat and whole milk.

The bill would also exempt milk fat from the saturated fat limits in school meals. Currently, more than 80 percent of children and adolescents exceed the recommendation to limit saturated fat in-

take to less than 10 percent of calories per day. Across the life span, efforts to increase dairy intakes would improve nutrient intakes and support overall health. Offering dairy during school meals supports consumption directly and can also set the stage for consuming a healthy dietary pattern outside of school meals.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Stoody can be found on pages 34–37 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you for your testimony. We will now begin with questions. Each Member will have five minutes.

Dr. Stoody, USDA research shows that while milk consumption has been falling across all ages for several decades, it fell at almost twice the rate as the previous two decades from 2010 to 2019. This coincides with research finding that 90 percent of Americans do not meet the Dietary Guidelines' recommended dairy consumption per day. Your testimony also notes that for all children, more dairy is consumed as higher fat versus fat-free or low-fat versions.

Given the disconnections between the recommendations and consumption, what was the science used to justify removing whole and reduced-fat milk from schools?

Dr. STOODY. If possible, sir, I would like to spend just a minute talking about what the Dietary Guidelines recommend overall. The Dietary Guidelines—and I am referencing the 2020 edition of the Dietary Guidelines that was released in December 2020—and it recommends an overall healthy diet. That diet is intended to have some flexibility so that it can be adapted to reflect person preferences and individual needs.

This healthy dietary pattern includes dairy but also includes vegetables, fruits, a variety of protein foods, and grains, particularly whole grains.

It is also a reality that we kind of have a number of calories that individuals should consume their diet within. As a general statement, across the Dietary Guidelines we recommend consuming foods from all those different food groups, and that most of the foods consumed should have little to no added sugars or saturated fat. That is not specific to the dairy group but more broadly to help us to stay within those calorie limits, just consuming less added sugars and saturated fat.

Now, for the typical American diet, as has been noted, we are in a situation where most Americans do not meet the Dietary Guidelines. We have a lot of children and adolescents—you referenced the prevalence of overweight and obesity. What we see is that in the typical American diet we do not have a lot of room. We are consuming too many calories, too much saturated fat, too much added sugars. We do not have a lot of room in the diet to consume the calories and saturated fat that are found in higher fat dairy products. At a population level, the recommendation is to choose most dairy should be fat-free or low-fat.

Now that does not mean within the context of a healthy diet dairy products with higher fat content, whether that be reduced-fat or whole milk, cannot be a part of a healthy dietary pattern. It is really important to think about that overall context, that overall diet that is consumed, and the Dietary Guidelines are intended to

provide that flexibility so that different options can be chosen, based on needs and preferences.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Very good. Senator Klobuchar.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Ms. Stoody, there is, of course, a lot of discussion about SNAP right now, in general. Could you talk about how participating in programs like SNAP or Medicaid—this is going to be right in front of us in the next few weeks—is linked to school meals?

Dr. STOODY. I totally understand and appreciate the question. I am really here in my capacity to speak to subject matter expertise in the Dietary Guidelines. I do not have information related to that specific question, but we are happy to bring that back to FNS to provide a response.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Very good. You have been a nutrition scientist for a long time. Can you please explain how school meals have improved in recent years as well as in areas where there is need for growth?

Dr. STOODY. Yes. The National School Lunch Act requires USDA to develop school meal nutrition standards that are consistent with the goals of the Dietary Guidelines. Over the years, USDA has worked to further align school meals with the Dietary Guidelines, and we have seen great progress in improvement and nutritional quality.

Research does show that for most children school meals are the healthiest meals that they consume in a day. We have this tool called the Health Eating Index that assesses how well a package of food aligns with the Dietary Guidelines. It has a score from 0 to 100. When we look at general consumption in the U.S., the HEI score in the U.S. is about a 56 out of 100, indicating we have a lot of room for improvement. Within school meals, the HEI score is between 79 and 81, which means school meals are more consistent with the Dietary Guidelines, and we have seen great improvement in various aspects of the school meals over time.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. You went over dairy and how important it is and how kids are not getting enough of it. Could you talk about the fact that dairy does provide a really important part in school meals, and is there evidence that school meals do help promote dairy, because people get exposed to drinking milk, kids get exposed?

Dr. STOODY. Of course, yes. Providing dairy in the school setting impacts intakes directly right there, and we do have evidence that school meals, as I mentioned, are the healthiest meals that kids are consuming in a day. I can take that back to give more specific statistics, but we certainly do have evidence that offering it, providing it, does promote consumption.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Thank you. Is USDA's position that fruits and vegetables are a critical part of a healthy diet?

Dr. STOODY. Yes.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay, good. I agree. Great. For the record, I want to point out that USDA's canceling the Local Foods Purchase Assistance are contrary to that advice. USDA's own data shows that 56 percent of the funds from that program went to buying produce, by far the largest purchase category. I am really con-

cerned about that, because if we want to promote fruits and vegetables, that cancellation, to me, just shows the opposite.

Do you want to comment at all on that?

Dr. STOODY. I cannot comment on that directly, but we are happy to bring that back to the Department.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. I appreciate that. Last, how can we encourage more consumption of nutritious dairy foods like milk, yogurt, and cheese?

Dr. STOODY. Offering it in school meals, incorporating it into programs across settings and sectors in all that we do. All of us have a role to play in promoting healthy choices, healthy outcomes, and healthy children. I think it is a broad—it is not just a one place. It is across settings and sectors where we need to make that a priority.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Tuberville.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Doctor, for being here today. My former profession was working with students and kids. I traveled to hundreds and hundreds of high schools across the country, in all 50 States. I ate at lunchrooms, and the food in most of them were atrocious. In 2010, we basically did away with milk, for some reason. I cannot imagine.

I have got a new granddaughter. My daughter-in-law is breastfeeding. We looked at the formula that we could have been feeding my new granddaughter. If we want to do away with something, we do away with that, because it is nothing but sugar. We are going to look at something that is so important to our kids growing up and their physical attributes of growing up to an adult, we are looking at the possibility of milk being detrimental. It is mind-boggling to me, but I guess there are a lot more smarter people than me.

You know, I used to have a training table for players. All of our athletes, and you could put milk, you could put tea, you put water out there, they would drink the milk—athletes. There is a reason that they look a lot better than a lot of our kids nowadays. At the end of the day we have to make a decision what is better. I cannot believe we are even getting involved in this.

Science improves and changes over time. We know that. Our nutrition standards should not be what they were in 2010. They have to change, have to change, as nutrition science data has changed. Can you discuss the 2005 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee's conclusions on dairy consumption's effect on children?

Dr. STOODY. Just to clarify, just to make sure I heard you correctly, you were referencing the 2025 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee?

Senator TUBERVILLE. Yes, ma'am.

Dr. STOODY. Thank you. The 2025 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee did an extensive review. They are convened as an external advisory committee, and the 2025 committee had 20 members. They did an extensive review on all aspects of the diet, including dairy—data analysis, a number of systematic reviews, and food pattern modeling.

At the end of the day they looked at a lot of new evidence. There is evidence that is looking at food sources of saturated fats, so

dairy that has different amounts of saturated fat, these different types that are exactly the conversation today. They also did a number of food pattern modeling analyses, and what that does is looks to what happens if you change the amount of dairy in a pattern.

At the end of the day, they found that you cannot reduce the amount of dairy in a dietary pattern, that the amount that is recommended still holds, and that is in large part because of all the nutrients that dairy provides. It is a good source, and the major source of calcium, vitamin D, and about a dozen other nutrients in the diet.

At the end of the day, their recommendations to the Departments, and I will note that is advice to the Departments for informing the next edition of the Dietary Guidelines, their advice was to maintain the current guidance.

Now, we are at a point, and Secretaries Rollins and Kennedy have acknowledged their commitment to supporting the development of the Dietary Guidelines to be released later this year, and they have also discussed doing a line-by-line review of the Committee's report and basing the next edition of the Dietary Guidelines on science.

I expect there will be a lot more discussion related to the topic of dairy as well as other aspects of the diet. At the end of the day, I think the 2025 Committee continued to emphasize the importance of dairy in a healthy dietary pattern.

Senator TUBERVILLE. At the end of the day, do not you agree that any milk—2 percent, whole milk—is much better for our kids growing up than soda?

Dr. STOODY. Yes. I think the point of the Dietary Guidelines is that there is flexibility. There are a number of different options within the dairy food group, and whether that be fat-free, low-fat, reduced-fat, whole milk, it is important to make selections that are right, that support individual needs and preferences, and in that context of the larger dietary pattern.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. [Presiding.] Senator Bennet.

Senator BENNET. Thank you very much, Senator Klobuchar, our Ranking Member, and thanks to all of you for having this hearing. Thank you for your testimony today. Before I came to the Senate I was the Superintendent of Schools in Denver, as you may know, and in that job learned firsthand how important access to nutrition is through school meals and other USDA programs, how they directly affect our kids' ability to learn, for all the reasons the Senator from Alabama was talking about.

Expanding access to nutrition programs and improving those programs is critical, not just for our kids but for people of all ages. It is why yesterday I filed the Hot Foods Act again to cut red tape in SNAP and to help working families, single parents, people with disabilities, and seniors put nutritious meals on the table. I look forward to hearing your thoughts about that as the legislation develops, to see how we can improve our program access, strengthen child nutrition, and make sure that we are knocking down barriers to accessing food.

The Chairman is not here, but he and I have worked for a long time together to make sure that the school calendar does not affect

that, and that there is the opportunity for kids to be able to get the food no matter where they are, and do it during the summer, as well as when school is in session, which is so important.

I want to thank you, Dr. Stoody, for your testimony and for your work at USDA. During the 2023–2024 school year, schools across Colorado served approximately 184,000 breakfasts and over 435,000 lunches daily, underscoring the significant role these programs play. Programs like SNAP and meal service options like the Community Eligibility Provision work in tandem to help ensure students can have access to these meals, as I was saying. SNAP supports families to help meet their nutritional needs and helps ensure that more children have consistent access to healthy food options, including at school. CEP leverages SNAP, as you know, to allow eligible schools to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students.

I come to my question. Providing free breakfast and lunch to all students has been proven to increase access to nutritional meals, make sure that kids eat those nutritious meals. It cuts red tape for families. What implications would losing access to meals do to changes in SNAP or the Community Eligibility Provision have on our ability to meet these nutritional goals, would you say?

Dr. STOODY. Yes, thank you for that question. I appreciate your discussion around the broad range of programs. Again, I am here in my capacity related to the Dietary Guidelines. FNS does offer the programs that you reference, and we are happy to take that back and provide a response related to the broader program implementation.

Senator BENNET. Well, could you talk a little bit more about—I mean, what is the importance to our national commitment to kids being able to get the nutrition that they need?

Dr. STOODY. Yes, I think we all agree that it is important for children, adolescents, adults to eat healthy foods and to improve health. I think there is definitely a commitment, an important aspect to promoting healthy consumption in kids.

Senator BENNET. All right. I have got one other question, but I will submit it for the record. Thank you very much for being here.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Senator Grassley.

Senator GRASSLEY. Thank you, Senator Klobuchar. Dr. Stoody, thank you for your testimony. You spoke recently in your testimony about the decline of dairy consumption. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans has limited the option of milk offered in schools. Now for years, in the most recent guidelines, higher-fat milk was cited to have favorable growth in body composition while reducing childhood obesity. The more restrictive school lunches are, the higher childhood obesity rates have become.

My first question to you, during your years at USDA there has been a decrease in milk consumption. Do you think that that decline has had a positive effect on children's health?

Dr. STOODY. No. Obviously, we want to promote the consumption of a diet that aligns with the Dietary Guidelines, and that is across the board, all the different food groups, including dairy. It is of great concern, I think, that consumption has been declining. I think these conversations are very important on how to promote healthier consumption. No, it is obviously of great concern that die-

tary consumption has worsened over time, and we are seeing that increased prevalence of overweight and obesity, increased prevalence of pre diabetes in children and adolescents.

Senator GRASSLEY. Then, last, do you think that continuing to restrict full-fat milk options will change the decline in milk consumption?

Dr. STOODY. I do not have data to speak to. As has been mentioned in the written testimony, we do acknowledge there is data from our colleagues at USDA's Agricultural Research Service that speaks to the most commonly consumed forms of dairy. We do see that reduced-fat milk is the most commonly consumed, followed by whole milk, then low-fat, then skim milk. Across all types of milk, consumption is too low.

The good thing about dairy, I think, is that there are a variety of options to fit different needs and preferences, and whatever that option is that is right for the individual child, whatever that option is, we need to work to improve current consumptions.

Senator GRASSLEY. Mr. Chairman, I will yield back my time.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Very good. Senator Durbin is up next.

Senator DURBIN. Thanks, Senator Klobuchar. I took an interest in school lunches and started looking in my State at what the kids are eating. I went to Roberto Clementi High School in Chicago, an inner-city school, largely African American and Hispanic, and I asked them, "What do the kids eat for breakfast?" They said, "Oh, the most popular breakfast here are a bag of Flaming Hots and a pop, an orange pop." That would be what they pick up at the store on the way to school.

I also went to Westinghouse High School, which is on the west side, and a beautiful school, and asked to sit down with school lunch. They did not particularly want me to do that but I did anyway. The menu that day featured corn dogs, which is, we believe, the source of all life in the Midwest—

[Laughter.]

Senator DURBIN [continuing]. pizza, and for vegetables, french fries. That was the lunch.

I also have paid close attention, as I hope my colleagues have, of the trash cans in the lunchroom and what is being thrown away by the students. It is entirely too damn much food being thrown away, to start with. I often wondered, we can give speeches and do our analysis in Washington, but the bottom line is what will those kids eat during the course of a school lunch. Bottom line.

I look at this controversy, and I suppose it is a controversy as to whether whole milk should be allowed, required in school lunch. Your background, I take it, is in nutrition. You are referred to as Doctor, as I saw. Is that correct, the Ph.D.?

Dr. STOODY. Yes, sir.

Senator DURBIN. Good. I am sure you are qualified. I am also sure that we are always asking the question when it comes to nutrition: too much fat, too much sugar, too much sodium. Aren't those the three things we kind of boil the conversation down to?

Dr. STOODY. Yes. Those are key components that we look at.

Senator DURBIN. Let me ask you a question. I know where Senator Marshall is coming from. He is the original milkman in the Senate Agriculture Committee, and proud of it. I just have to ask

this. I look at the groups that oppose this bill, and they include the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Heart Association, the American Public Health Association, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners, National WIC Association. Do you know any major health groups that support this bill?

Dr. STOODY. I do not have information to that regard.

Senator DURBIN. Okay. I would be interested in that.

Has any survey been done about kids, whether they will accept two percent milk the same as whole milk, or if they have a preference for skim milk or whole milk or two percent?

Dr. STOODY. We do not have data on preference directly, just data on what is currently consumed. The most commonly consumed is two percent, followed by whole, then low-fat and fat-free. We do have data that across the board current consumptions need to increase. Whatever the form is, we need to have greater consumption of dairy.

Senator DURBIN. Did you use the figure 35 percent consumption for a certain group of teenagers, I guess it is?

Dr. STOODY. Using the most recent data, about 35 percent of adolescents consume fluid milk on any given day.

Senator DURBIN. I will tell you, I am just amazed it is that high. I really am. When you consider all the advertising for all the pop and soda and sweet drinks that these kids are exposed to during the course of their lives, and the advertising for milk is virtually zero, as I see it. I think we need much more milk consumption. Moving in the direction of those soda and pop drinks, it certainly cannot be good for kids, for their teeth or their health.

Thank you. I yield.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you very much, Senator Durbin. Senator Marshall.

Senator MARSHALL. Well, thank you, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and thank you, Senator Boozman, for allowing us to have this. If you could just spare me a moment here, I have got to clear my throat a little bit.

[Pause.]

Senator MARSHALL. There. I can speak better now.

You know, we all came to Congress with a reason, and I sat down on my first day and had a list of 10 things I wanted to do when I got here—you know, save the world, save Medicare, save Medicaid, balance the budget, and get whole milk back in school. This is a great day for us to have a hearing on this, and I do appreciate the Members of the Agriculture Committee coming here and having this discussion, as well.

I think about whole milk growing up, where my grandparents delivered milk to us two or three times a week, and it was just part of our diet, part of a healthy diet, and how important whole milk is. You think about the MAHA movement—the Make America Healthy Again movement—it is about whole foods, and I think we could characterize whole milk as part of that MAHA movement, as well. I think about the fat-soluble vitamins, which are so important, that we have to have some fat in our body to absorb vitamins A, D, E, and K.

Maybe we will just talk about, you know, there are bad fats, there are good fats, and ask Dr. Stoody a little bit about, what are the good fats? What are the good things in whole milk that separate it from the one percent and the lesser fat parts of milk?

Dr. STOODY. First I do want to note the Dietary Guidelines do not say that whole milk is a bad food to consume. It does say that, in general, considering what current consumptions are in the U.S., considering current health status of children and adolescents, generally most children should increase consumption, and probably the best way to do that is through lower-fat options.

For those who eat a healthy diet, for those who are active, as you mentioned athletes, whole milk can be a great option. It really is thinking about the overall context of the diet rather than kind of saying one food is good or bad. Dairy is a healthy choice, but it really matters what you are eating with that dairy.

Senator MARSHALL. Well, I mean, just talk a little bit more about healthy fats. Some of the good things about these healthy fats is it helps with hormone production, so think about adolescents going through puberty, those types of things. There are good fats that help with that hormone production. Also I think there are good studies that show that healthy fats also decrease your appetite for later, that it has some satiety impact. Would you agree or expand on those thoughts?

Dr. STOODY. I am aware of that research. We have not addressed it directly in the Dietary Guidelines, but I am aware of the research that you are referencing. Yes.

Senator MARSHALL. Then you also agree with me that whole milk has small amounts of omega-3 fatty acids, which support brain health, and inflammation it controls, as well.

Dr. STOODY. Yes. The Dietary Guidelines actually recommend, for those one to two years of age, that plain whole milk be the type of dairy that is consumed, because of the importance of whole milk to supporting brain development. Then after that point, the recommendation is to move toward lower fat. There is a bit of an evidence gap as to exactly when that transition to lower-fat options might be most beneficial, but there are definitely benefits of plain whole milk, particularly in young children, to supporting brain development.

Senator MARSHALL. Association does not necessarily determine cause, but I think as we saw whole milk come off of the school lunch menus we also saw consumption of milk come down consistently. Senator Durbin makes a good point about it has to taste good. I do not know that I am aware of any good studies either proving my point. Certainly it seems to me that whole milk tastes a whole lot better, and that we have seen milk consumption go down when whole milk was taken out of the school lunches. Would that be accurate?

Dr. STOODY. I do not have data for specifically school meals and what has happened since, for example, the 2010, 2012, when it moved toward just low-fat and fat-free. We do see that, as you mentioned, at the national level. We see that milk consumption really—you know, drinking fluid milk started to decline in the early 2000's, and it has continued to decline. I think it is very con-

cerning that current consumption in adolescents is about half a cup lower per day than it was two decades ago.

Senator MARSHALL. Great. I want to make one more point. I was going to save this question for one of the other witnesses but I still want to make the point about my concern about osteoporosis and osteopenia, that bone mass density peaks around age 28. What we are seeing now is a generation of people reaching that age that did not drink milk, and their bone mass, bone density is down a standard deviation. Maybe it is more than that.

While today most women start developing osteopenia—and when you reach that peak bone mass at age 28, the rest of our life, that aging process starts. It is really hard to build bone mass beyond that. We are going to have women develop osteopenia, osteoporosis a decade sooner, and we are going to see men suddenly also have osteopenia, as well.

One thing I cannot believe I forgot to do was to thank Senator Welch for his leadership in this, on this bill, Senators Fetterman, Gillibrand, Slotkin, King, McCormick, Grassley, Hyde-Smith, Risch, Crapo, Ernst, and Collins for helping to support this, as well. Senator Welch, just basically thank you for your leadership. Vermont is known as a great milk State.

We will have to come back later to catch the thoughts on osteopenia and osteoporosis. I am way past my time. Thank you, Ranking Member.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you very much. I appreciate it. Then next up, well, we have two Senators who have a lot of cows in their State. Even though Vermont may be most identified with it, I think Senator Schiff was here first. Senator Schiff.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you, Chairman and Ranking Member. Thanks for holding this hearing today, and Dr. Stoody, thank you for being here. It is nice, as an Adam, to be in the presence of another Eve. My wife is Eve also, by the way.

Before we get to questions about the bill, as we speak, my colleagues on the other side of the aisle are drafting a bill that would eliminate school meal programs for millions of kids. That bill may come into the Senate as soon as this week. The bill that is the prime focus of this hearing deserves attention, but I do not see how we can discuss children's health and nutrition without acknowledging the important role of Federally funded school meal programs that are literally a lifeline for so many kids. I asked some of the school districts in California to send me their experiences, and let me just read one that highlights the importance of our support for school meal programs.

"I was in the cafeteria and a second-grade class was boarding the bus for a field trip. The teacher had told all the students to bring your lunch because we will not be able to go to the cafeteria today, figuring everyone had food at home, at this school on the right side of town. Lucy came to the cafeteria at 9:30, as they were boarding the bus, to ask for something to drink because daddy did not have anything to drink at home. When we checked what Lucy did have, she had a small bag of Fritos and two pieces of leftover Halloween candy. I asked Lucy where her lunch was, and she looked at the ground and said, 'The teacher said we won't be back in time for lunch and this is all we have at home.' Lucy relies on school lunch,

even on the good side of town, even when no one realizes she does. Children suffer in silence, even on the good side of town in the middle of affluence. I seriously cry every time I tell this story and think of her face.”

That is a good illustration of what will be at stake on the floor this week with proposals to make massive cuts to the school meal programs.

Let me turn to the question I have about this bill, and my question revolves around the absence of any alternative that involves non-dairy alternatives in the bill. In California and many States represented by Members of the Committee, there are millions of students who are lactose intolerant or have adverse reactions to dairy. Lactose-free milk is not always a good option because of their cost to schools and because some kids cannot drink milk due to sensitivity to milk proteins. Some kids simply want a non-dairy option. At the same time, requiring a formal written note for an alternative due to inability to drink milk is an unnecessary bit of red tape for students and parents.

If this bill is about giving children access to nutritious options, would it improve health outcomes as well as parent and student sense of choice, to have easy access to non-dairy alternatives for kids?

Dr. STODY. Thank you for that question. I can speak first to the Dietary Guidelines and what it recommends related to what is included within the dairy food group. The dairy food group within the Dietary Guidelines does include a variety of different cow milk options, and it also includes soy milk and soy yogurt as alternatives. I say alternatives but they are literally within the food group.

I think that your question about their uses within school meals might be a great question for the next panel. I know we also have data on that within FNS. I can say within the Dietary Guidelines themselves soy milk is provided as within the dairy group, and it can certainly be a healthy way to meet dairy recommendations.

Senator SCHIFF. Well, along those lines, do you see any reason for authorizing schools to offer whole milk on the lunch line but not fortified soy milk, from a nutritional point of view?

Dr. STODY. From a nutritional point of view, cow’s milk and soy milk are included in the same group and provide very similar nutrient compositions.

Senator SCHIFF. Okay. Thank you. This is not a denigration of the bill, which I supported in the House, but it is a call to include non-dairy alternatives, as well. With that I yield back.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you very much, Senator Schiff. Senator Justice.

Senator JUSTICE. Thank you so much. Let me just say a few things about the State of West Virginia. Just think about this just for a second. I am a coach. I am with the kids all the time, and I have been that way forever more. Probably that is why I have got all this white hair. I am really only 46 years old.

[Laughter.]

Senator JUSTICE. When you have coached as many games as I have coached, and I have coached 1,300-some games, and with all that being said, you get white hair pretty easily. You get white hair

a lot easier if you just absolutely are there with the kids and you see what they are going through.

You know, if you think in West Virginia one out of every five kids faces food insecurity every single day, it is sad beyond belief. You know, when I was the Governor in West Virginia we made a real priority to try to some way, somehow, do something about hunger, do something about our food banks. We have an opportunity here to do something that is so precious, it is off the chart.

It is unusual that the first lady of West Virginia, when I was the Governor—and my wife Cathy is with me today—she did something that is off the chart. She did something with communities and school that was absolutely directed right at helping kids that were in real need.

Now just think about it. We are absolutely looking at the possibility of whole milk and how much meaningfulness that whole milk could bring to our children. Absolutely, many of our kids in our schools in West Virginia, these are the primary meals of their whole day. That is all there is to it. Absolutely, if we cannot step up and do the right thing for nutrition for our children, and God knows there are many, many, many things that our kids are putting in their bodies that they should not be putting in. That is all there is to it. One of those things is not whole milk, in my opinion.

With all that being said, also, being a coach, and not just athletes. I want you to pay really close attention to just this: kids want good stuff to eat today. You may think that kids just want junk to eat today. You know, in all honestly, imagine this. Imagine having a kid that is a high school kid that is playing on your basketball team that has never eaten a candy bar in his life. You know, it is really true.

With all that being said, I am telling you, you have the attention of our children today. Our kids want to do better. They really do. We have an opportunity to step up. That is exactly what we should be doing. We should be trying, in every possible way we possibly can, to make our kids healthier, to absolutely give them the nutrition that they need, and I am absolutely, wholeheartedly, and not as a pun, but I am wholeheartedly in favor of moving forward with whole milk.

With all that being said, I defer my remaining time to our Madam Chairman.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Very good. Thank you. I know you have also been joined by your wife Cathy, so we welcome her, as well. Next up is Senator Welch.

Senator WELCH. Senator Justice—is it——

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Senator Luján is next. I am sorry. He was here earlier. Are you sure? Okay. Thanks.

Senator WELCH. Well, I was just going to say, you spoke for me. I really appreciated that. Also I notice my colleague from Kansas is usually low key and rarely shows off, except in service of milk. I appreciate you doing that.

You know, what you said, Senator Justice, is so absolutely true, and one in five, you used the word “food insecurity,” that is what we are talking about, it is downright hungry. Kids are hungry. They show up and they are hungry, and it is through no fault of their own.

I do not know where things got off the rails, because I have such a vivid memory as a boy, looking forward to Roger's box of milk when I got to school. We all did, and it got us through the morning. Sometimes it was chocolate, which I guess we are not advocating for here, but I sneak a little of that every once in a while, whole milk, chocolate.

It is really reassuring to me that we are taking up this bill about whole milk, because it is about whole milk. It is about our farmers. It is about an acknowledgement that a school is a place where kids are going to get the opportunity to get some decent nutrition. It does not matter what our politics are. We all care about our kids, right?

It is tough. It is tough, tough, tough for a lot of families to get healthy food, because so much has happened in the food industry, where in order to make a lot of profit, the enterprises that sell food are often very consolidated, and the goal that they have is maximization of profit. You look at what a lot of the ingredients are on some of the things that are in the store, and you have never heard of any of them.

Whole food also, by the way, tends to be more locally produced. The virtuous cycle that happens when you are getting local products—milk from Vermont dairy or Kansas dairy or West Virginia, or vegetables grown locally—that is healthy food but it is also locally produced, and it strengthens the rural economy. All of us, in every one of our States, is really suffering from incredible pressures on our rural economy, that is making life very, very difficult there.

Senator Marshall, I just want to thank you for your leadership on this very practical, and I think long overdue legislation about whole milk.

The other thing that I have been impressed at, Vermont is a big dairy State, as you mentioned, Senator Klobuchar. You know, there is an immense amount of pride among our dairy farmers. Who works harder? Maybe the coal miners, okay.

Senator JUSTICE. Nobody works harder than dairy people.

Senator WELCH. Well, I was in one of your coal mines, and they will give them a run for their money. That is the point, is that we can have a food system where we get nutritious food by people who are willing to work really, really hard. They are not in the goal of becoming millionaires. They are in the goal of a committed life to helping the kids and all of us have nutritious food. We went off the rails when we made it tough for whole milk to be the schools.

I also want to acknowledge your point about nutrition as a whole. You know, the USDA had some grants that resulted in Vermont getting a Dairy Innovation Center, and that resulted in some facilities putting milk tanks in the schools, where the kids would be able to get milk when they wanted it. They would take some milk home. You know, do you check everybody's wallet to see whether they have got money in it and can afford it or not? No, you took advantage of the fact that these kids are at school and they can just go over there and choose to drink some milk.

I hope that as we pursue this, this whole milk opportunity for our kids and for our farmers, that it is the beginning of a real com-

mitment to nutritious, locally produced, natural foods as being a much bigger part of what our diet is.

Is this going to help us on the obesity issue that I think is a real problem for America, if we can get back to some whole milk products and other natural products?

Dr. STOODY. I think we need to see how time goes. I think we are in a situation where diets are so far from recommendations across the board. The recommendations for a healthy diet include vegetables, fruits, grains, a variety of protein foods and dairy. In general, 80 to 90 percent of people in the U.S. do not meet the recommendations for vegetables, fruits, dairy. We consume too many refined grains, on average. We consume too much added sugars. We consume too much saturated fat.

I think this is one piece of the puzzle to incorporate more dairy. But we have a large nutrition problem, and I think it needs action across multiple fronts, and not just dairy alone.

Senator WELCH. Thank you. My time is up, but I would say if we can do something that is good, let's do it, and then we will do another thing that is good. Thank you.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Senator Luján, at least you did not have to wait long. Senator Luján.

Senator LUJÁN. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank everyone for this important hearing today.

Now, it is my understanding that we are gathered here for a hearing that is titled "The Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act and Improving Children's Health." I just want that to sit in a little bit. Improving Children's Health. I appreciate that we are having this conversation today, but I think we are missing the big picture. There is a whole conversation going on right now about devastating the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. My colleagues from the other side of the aisle want to cut between \$1 billion and \$230 billion from SNAP. Improving Children's Health.

This comes while President Trump pushes for the largest peacetime tax increase in modern U.S. history through sweeping tariffs. As the tariffs take effect and the cost of groceries rise, my Republican colleagues are planning to slash a few programs that exist to help families keep food on the table. I think it would be important to have a hearing about that, as well.

For kids across the country, the funding levels we debate here in this room are not an abstract number in the budget resolution. These are real kids, real people, people that we all represent. It is the difference between having a hot lunch in school and food in the cupboards when they come home, and going hungry.

Nearly one in four kids in the United States relies on SNAP benefits. These kids do not get to choose how much money their parents have in their bank accounts each week to buy food. Sometimes they do not even get to choose what they get to eat.

Dr. Stoody, I want to thank you for being here. I appreciate the information you provided in your testimony about the impacts of dairy consumption on the health of children. Currently, one in four children in the United States rely on SNAP to access food. In 2023, the dairy industry conservatively estimated that SNAP dollars purchased \$9.5 billion of dairy products—\$9.5 billion of dairy products purchased by SNAP. A bunch of us represent States that have

strong dairies. I do, as well. I wonder what the conversations are like when we are talking to those dairy families and saying, “Don’t worry. These SNAP cuts aren’t going to devastate your practice.” “Don’t worry. You don’t have to get rid of herds.”

We need a basis for what it is, and like Senator Welch said, do what is right. A wise person once said that it is never a bad time to do what is right.

I have a few questions here. Dr. Stooddy, yes or no. Did President Trump and the USDA cut \$1 billion in funding for schools and food banks to buy fresh, locally grown food from nearby farmers by eliminating the local food and schools program and the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program?

Dr. STOODY. Sir, I am here as a subject matter expert related to the Dietary Guidelines. I cannot speak to that, but we are happy to bring that back to the department.

Senator LUJÁN. I can answer that question. The answer to that question is yes. On March 7, 2025, the USDA terminated a local foods and schools program and the Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement program.

Dr. Stooddy, yes or no. Did President Trump and the USDA cancel the Patrick Leahy Farm-to-School Grant Program, which provided schools with support for sourcing local foods for school lunches and breakfasts?

Dr. STOODY. Thank you, sir. I am not able to answer that question.

Senator LUJÁN. I have an answer to that one that might surprise everyone. The answer to that question is also yes. USDA notified grant applicants on March 24th that the Fiscal Year 2025 competition for the Patrick Leahy Farm-to-School Grant Program was, quote, “canceled.”

Dr. Stooddy, yes or no. Did President Trump and the USDA freeze \$500 million in food deliveries to food banks under The Emergency Food Assistance Program without explanation?

Dr. STOODY. Thank you, sir. I am not able to answer that question.

Senator LUJÁN. The answer to that question is yes. In March 2025, USDA suspended millions of dollars in Commodity Credit Corporation funds originally destined for food banks across the country through The Emergency Food Assistance Program.

I have several others as examples here. I did not even get a chance to visit about whole milk. I grew up as a young person, Roger Marshall, with not much money in the bank, but we were blessed to have a dairy down the street. My friends still make fun of me because when I get a carton of milk from the grocery store I shake it. They ask me, “Why are you shaking that carton?” “It is how I grew up. The cream rose to the top in that milk and you have to shake it before you are going to drink it, if you are going to enjoy it.”

My debate is not about whole milk. I drink it. I support it. If we want more whole milk to families across the country and more nutritious food, let’s have that debate and let’s stand strong. Let’s get a farm bill done. Let’s make sure we do this, where we support producers across the country and support the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, so that my farmers back home, when they are

having conversations with USDA about their planting schedule in a year, because they know who their customers are going to be and who they are going to be able to sell food to, and then the rug gets pulled out from them after they made a year of decisions to plant this stuff, it does not make sense. I think we can do things better around here.

Thank you for the time. I yield back.

Chairman BOOZMAN. [Presiding.] Thank you, Dr. Stooddy, for being here today. We do appreciate your testimony very, very much, and as always it is very, very helpful.

Let's take a second and get the other panel in place.

[Pause.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Okay. I think we are back in business.

First I would like to introduce Dr. Keith Ayoob, who is an Associate Clinical Professor Emeritus at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City. For over 32 years, Dr. Ayoob directed the nutrition clinic as part of the Children's Evaluation and Rehabilitation Center at Einstein. He is also a registered dietitian and nutritionist, with over 30 years of clinical experience, working mostly with low-income minority children and families in the Bronx.

Thank you for being here today, Dr. Ayoob. I look forward to your testimony.

**STATEMENT OF KEITH AYOOB, Ed.D., ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
EMERITUS, DEPARTMENT OF PEDIATRICS, ALBERT EINSTEIN
COLLEGE OF MEDICINE, BRONX, NY**

Dr. AYOOB. Thank you to Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and the Committee for the opportunity to speak to you about the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act.

As introduced, I am an Associate Professor Emeritus of Pediatrics at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. For 33 years, I directed the Nutrition Clinic as part of the Children's Evaluation and Rehabilitation Center, a large diagnostic and treatment center at Einstein for children and families with special needs. I am also an RDN, a registered dietitian/nutritionist. My clinic serves mostly low-income minority children and families in the Bronx.

Testifying before Congress is not typically part of my job. I am here because the issue matters to the children I see, so it matters to me.

Dairy milk in schools, and dairy milk, in general, has 13 essential nutrients, including three of the four what are called nutrients of concern: calcium, potassium, and vitamin D, so identified by the Dietary Guidelines because the majority of Americans, including children, are not getting adequate amounts.

In terms of health, a plethora of scientific literature demonstrates that the consumption of cow's milk provides children with better bone health, a lower risk for type 2 diabetes, and a lower risk for cardiovascular disease.

A systematic review of studies that looked at cardiometabolic health in children ages 2 to 18 years found that consumption of dairy foods including whole and reduced-fat milk had no association with cardiometabolic risk.

Saturated fat does not exist in isolation in foods, yet historically, we viewed saturated fat monolithically. We now know that not all saturated fat behaves the same way in the body. In dairy foods, it is bound to protein like a dairy-fat or protein-fat matrix, and in this form, the body seems to have handled it differently. When saturated fats are in the protein-fat network that occurs in dairy foods like milk, yogurt, and cheese, they appear not to decrease bad cholesterol and to lower the harmful portion of bad cholesterol. Can other foods lower bad cholesterol and reduce cardiovascular risk? Absolutely, but they cannot provide the 13 essential nutrients in milk.

Numerous systematic reviews have found that higher-fat milk consumption to be associated with lower childhood obesity. I work primarily with Black and Hispanic children, and obesity rates are higher in this population. That said, in 2010, when whole milk and reduced-fat were removed from school meals, obesity prevalence was about 17 percent. Since the removal of whole milk and reduced-fat milk in schools, obesity prevalence has increased. It is now 21 percent, but it is higher, about 25 percent, in Black and Hispanic children, which is the population that I work with.

Clearly whole milk was not the issue here. The type of milk in schools was not the cause of this, and it is not the cure.

Taking this a step further, if children are not drinking milk at school because the school does not have the type of milk they prefer, one would postulate that they would lose weight. There is no evidence this is happening.

No matter what type of milk is offered in school, none of it is nutritious until students drink it. They do not drink it often enough, which just exacerbates their nutrient and dietary gaps.

Moreover, giving the children the kind of milk option they like can encourage participation in school meal programs, and that is my goal. Most of the children that I see are from low-income families, and specifically, milk provides 22 percent of the calcium, 40 percent of the vitamin D, and 10 percent of the potassium in the American diet. In a study of low-income children, 77 percent of their daily milk intake came from school meals.

In conclusion, milk, including low-fat milk, reduced-fat milk, and whole milk, and skim, and lactose-free varieties represents a nutrient package that I have never been able to find in any other single food or beverage.

Thank you very much for your time, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Ayooob can be found on pages 38–43 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you, Dr. Ayooob.

Next we will hear from Mrs. Krista Byler. Mrs. Byler currently serves as the District Chef and Food Service Director for Union City Area School District, a rural community located in northwestern Pennsylvania. She studied at Pennsylvania's Institute of Culinary Arts and spent several years working as a professional chef prior to entering school nutrition in 2005. Mrs. Byler comes from a family of dairy farmers, and brings her appreciation for agriculture and passion for culinary education to school nutrition.

Thank you very much, Mrs. Byler, for taking time away from your family and your students to be with us today.

STATEMENT OF KRISTA BYLER, DISTRICT FOOD SERVICE DIRECTOR/CHEF, UNION CITY AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT, SPARTANSBURG, PA

Mrs. BYLER. Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and Members of the Committee, good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today.

My name is Krista Byler. I am a professional chef turned lunch lady. I have been with the Union City Area School District for 20 years as the Food Service Director and District Chef.

When I began my career in child nutrition it was for selfish reasons. The schedule aligned better with my family life and few food service positions offer that opportunity. What I did not know 20 years ago, but quickly learned, was how child nutrition would change me and even break me. I think we have heard stories today that speak to that.

Half of the reason I am here today is that passion for child nutrition. The other half, as Senator Boozman mentioned, I come from a dairy family. I grew up in my grandfather's dairy back yard, and have been married for 24 years to a once dairy farmer, now turned beef producer. Dairy holds a huge space in my heart, obviously, as does child nutrition.

In 2010, when the Child Reauthorization was passed, I was very concerned about how the school milk changes would affect both our students and our dairy farm families in Pennsylvania and nationwide. I kept a close eye on the milk consumption and waste that we started seeing in about 2012, when the act actually was put into practice. It was heartbreaking what I was seeing at our little, 1,000-student school district. The amount of waste that we were throwing away each day was disheartening.

As the years grew, with this new legislation in place, my dairy orders also greatly declined. We were seeing a huge increase in waste and a huge decline in the amount of milk that I was actually ordering, because our students were not choosing to take milk.

In the spring of 2018, I attended the Legislation Action Committee, put on by the School Nutrition Association, in Washington, DC, where I had the opportunity to meet with GT Thompson and a group of school nutrition professionals that were like-minded in their concern for the school milk waste. As well, there were some dairy interest groups there. Through that meeting, I was introduced to the Pennsylvania Grassroots Dairy Committee, and they had invited me to do some data collection for the group.

With the blessing of our school board of directors, in the 2019–2020 school year, we ran a school milk choice trial. We began offering all levels of milk fat, both flavored and unflavored, in our district for the entire school year. The results are astounding. In my written testimony, if you would like to check out the full presentation with all of the survey results and the data, it is there for you to read.

What I want to really drive home today is two main data points: the 50 percent increase in milk consumption and the 95 percent—

that is right, 95 percent—reduction in milk waste just because we offered a variety of milk choices that fit our students need.

This is a win for our students as well as our farmers. We need to be the change makers that our students and dairy farmers both need. We need to bring back the ability to offer milk fat choice in schools, including nutrient-dense whole milk, which, by the way, is just 3.25 to 3.5 percent fat.

I would be remiss if I did not address the concerns that you have also heard a lot about today regarding the local food cut, CEP reduction, the Patrick Leahy programs. Unfortunately, those cuts, combined with the increasing cost of procurement, may force schools to scale back or abandon some of the efforts that they have put into place recently that are really incredible. The school meals you heard about today, I can firsthand say that there are some very, very incredible things happening that do not speak to that, and I hate to see those cut due to the lack of funding.

I believe access to good quality, nutrient-dense school food is a basic right of education. School meals are an essential school supply.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak. I welcome any questions you might have.

[The prepared statement of Mrs. Byler can be found on pages 44–56 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you.

Dr. Linette Dodson currently serves as the Deputy Superintendent of School Nutrition for the Georgia Department of Education. Prior to joining the Georgia Department of Education in 2019, she served as Local School Nutrition Director in Georgia for over 18 years. Her leadership in helping Georgia students continue receiving meals during the pandemic earned her Georgia’s “Big Voices for Children Award,” in 2023.

Dr. Dodson, thank you for joining us today. We look forward to your testimony.

STATEMENT OF LINETTE DODSON, Ph.D., DEPUTY SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOL NUTRITION, GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, CARROLLTON, GA

Dr. DODSON. Thank you, Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the importance of the national school meal programs and share some current challenges and best practices.

I am Linette Dodson, Deputy Superintendent of School Nutrition for Georgia Department of Education, and a registered dietitian. Prior to my role at the State I was a local director for almost 20 years, and I really discovered my passion for school nutrition while working in my children’s school district.

I have seen firsthand the positive impact the national school meal programs on children have locally and Statewide. School meals are a vital source of nutrition for 30 million school-age children across our country. It is a program perfectly positioned to significantly impact the health of our Nation’s children, if properly supported. As a valuable partner in education, school meals can integrate food-based learning to help students learn about food, en-

hance their education, and improve their diets. School meals are a science-based investment in our Nation's future, supporting children's growth, development, and academic success. With a diverse menu of whole grains, lean meats, fruits, vegetables, and milk, they should be accessible to all students as part of their school day.

We must not let the progress made in improving students' dietary habits during the school year falter during summer months when school is out. This is why summer meal programs are essential. They provide children with continued access to nutritious meals, even outside of the school setting. The recent flexibilities allowing to-go meal options in rural areas has significantly expanded our reach, ensuring more children in need receive healthy food while school is out.

However, I think it is important for the Committee to understand that there are serious challenges that the programs are facing today, including soaring food costs, labor shortages, and unnecessary program complexities. Federal funding that supports these meals must cover the cost of purchasing food, paying for labor and benefits, as well as purchasing equipment.

Many programs are challenged just like consumers with increased costs in all these areas. Expanded reimbursement is needed to maintain the food quality required to be domestically sourced and the skilled workforce to prepare that food.

There are complex program regulations that require extensive staff training and support and take away from the focus of nutritious foods. Continuing to simplify the program and reduce these administrative burdens would allow more focus to be on the food that is actually served to students.

Beyond the need for increased reimbursement and simplification of regulations, the programs have benefited from additional investments such as the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and Equipment Grants. The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program introduces fruits and vegetable snacks to elementary school children, and it improves acceptability and consumption of those food items in the meal program. The Equipment Grants help provide specialized kitchen equipment needed to prepare school meals with fresh ingredients.

Recent Federal grants expanded the inclusion of locally sourced foods, improving the quality of these meals, and providing direct support for local farmers. All of these supports have only strengthened the program and could be increased to expand the documented positive impacts.

In Georgia, our local districts embrace innovation to focus on the quality of meals served to our students. Our K-12 culinary culture moves beyond just regulatory compliance. This means the incorporation of fresh local foods, applying culinary techniques, food safety standards with good customer service, which creates a school meal experience. Federal requirements must be met, but the standard should be greater than just meeting requirements. For Georgia it is a quality school meal being provided to every student, in every school, every day.

Thank you from our Nation's school-age children and school nutrition professionals for the financial commitment that has been made for almost 80 years funding school meals. The additional

grant funding has allowed for the expansion of farm-to-school initiatives, purchases of kitchen equipment, and expansion of local foods, and providing quality school meals that look and taste good is an investment worth making.

Please consider expanding the reimbursement rates, continue to invest in farm-to-school and local purchasing programs and grant initiatives to streamline program regulations. Our goal should be to ensure a quality school meal is available to every student, every day, in our Nation's schools. Thank you so much.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Dodson can be found on pages 57–62 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you. Senator Klobuchar.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you. Senator Slotkin welcomes you. She could not be here at this moment, Mr. Gorman, and passed on your good wishes. I know you have served as the Food Service Director for public schools in Michigan for 25 years, and you are a graduate of the Michigan State University Eli Broad School of Business, with a bachelor's degree in hotel and restaurant management. In addition to your work as School Food Director for your school district you have served in a number of roles related to child nutrition and school meals, and you have served the School Nutrition Association of Michigan, as well.

We thank you and welcome you to this hearing.

**STATEMENT OF DAN GORMAN, FOOD SERVICE DIRECTOR,
MONTAGUE AREA PUBLIC AND NORTH MUSKEGON PUBLIC
SCHOOLS, MONTAGUE, MI**

Mr. GORMAN. Thank you, Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and Members of the Committee. I appreciate this opportunity. As has been said, my name is Dan Gorman. I have been the School Food Service Director in Montague Area Public Schools and North Muskegon Public Schools for the past 26 years.

Today I would like to talk about this dollar. This dollar allocated by Congress for school means, and in my opinion is the best dollar that the U.S. Government spends. We have been given the mission in school meals, feed America's children. We do that every day—30 million lunches and 15 million breakfasts, served by kind, caring, nutrition professionals offering well-balanced meals.

What else does the dollar do? Those 45 million meals every day include fruits and vegetables grown by American farmers, meat from American ranchers and producers, and milk from American dairies. It funds food manufacturers, food distributors, and provides meaningful work to lunch ladies across the Nation.

Finally, school meals serve as a financial and nutritional safety net for millions of kids. Now I know this hearing is about whole milk, and I would just like to note, flexibility rather than mandates allows me to best serve my students and reflects the needs of my community.

What worries me more is the proposals that would reduce Community Eligibility Provision and divert resources away from school meals. CEP is smart government. CEP allows high-need schools to offer breakfast and lunch at no charge to all students. It takes an economic snapshot of the community, called an ISP, using SNAP and Medicaid data. Schools with an ISP of 25 percent or higher

qualify for CEP. To account for families not eligible enrolled in SNAP, CEP applies a 1.6 multiplier. In North Muskegon, our ISP is 25 percent. We can offer free meals to all of our students. Our Federal reimbursement is approximately 40 percent. Luckily, Michigan is a Healthy School Meals for All State, and the State picks up the additional 60 percent of our cost shortfall.

CEP is a great success. In North Muskegon we saw a 300 percent increase in our breakfast participation and a 30 percent increase in our lunch participation. It has made a real difference. Our ability to focus on student meals and not paperwork has been a game changer.

The proposal to raise the CEP threshold from 25 percent to 60 percent would devastate our districts I oversee and schools nationwide. If passed, Montague, North Muskegon, and 24,000 other high-need schools would lose CEP and free meal access.

Let me talk a little bit about the non-CEP meal application process. It is inefficient. My families would have to fill out an application, and then my staff would have to review that application, and then I would have to look at it to make sure everything is right. Then someone from our State office, every three to five years, they would come look at the piece of paper. Then we hire an auditor every year and they check out that piece of paper, and then at some point the USDA comes by and they look at it, all to confirm that Johnny is deserving of a free meal.

If the House Budget Chair's proposal to increase household income verification passes, I would have to process over 1,000 applications a year. There are large school districts that would have the burden of about 20,000 applications, and this is a big concern to me.

I would also say the other cutbacks that have been talked about around agriculture is very hurtful. Investing in small agriculture is essential for national security. A resilient nation requires strong small farms, and these programs build that resilience. They must continue.

This Committee has a long history of getting things done. While other things might work differently in these halls, this Committee has always been a group that works for America. I hope that continues.

I am incredibly grateful to be here to share this message. We need to be successful in school nutrition because our students cannot be successful without it. I am ready to help in any way to make this dollar work better for our kids, and I welcome your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Gorman can be found on pages 63–69 in the appendix.]

Chairman BOOZMAN. Thank you very much. We do appreciate you all being here and the helpful testimony.

Mrs. Byler, in your testimony you highlighted the significant reduction in milk waste as a result of the trial you conducted to offer students a wider variety of options. Can you expand on how limiting choices led to increased waste of milk and how expanding choice could result in less milk being thrown away?

Mrs. BYLER. Absolutely. Obviously I can only speak really from my district, but in my district most of the students were very upset when we had the rollback because they are not familiar with skim

milk or one percent. I will give them credit. They all tried it, and the majority decided they did not like it.

When we had the milk trial back, after about seven years of not having those options, they were thrilled. Our student council actually did the data collection, and unfortunately they took a little bit of heat after the 2020 school year, when we went back to not being able to offer the variety. Just overwhelmingly, the feedback we had from the students was they want what they are familiar with. They want something that is satisfying. Our athletes especially were very vocal about something that sticks with them. It is a perfect recovery drink. There is just a lot of anecdotal data that I have from our students that what works for them is best. Having a full variety of options is best.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Very good. Dr. Ayoob, in your testimony you speak to the complexity of obesity and the tendency of many groups to point to one issue as the sole cause for obesity. Can you expand on how policymakers in the nutrition community have gotten it wrong in the past by drawing a correlation between milk and obesity?

Dr. AYOOB. There actually is no correlation between milk and obesity. Actually, the correlation is inverse. A greater consumption of dairy foods, historically, has shown less obesity. Can I build on what Mrs. Byler said about what the children chose? I know my kids, in my clinic, have said that they find skim milk watery. It is just what you are used to, and they are not used to that at home. They may take that carton of milk. That is fine. The school will get reimbursed. I am concerned they drain that carton of milk. Because if they take a few sips and then, okay, that is enough, I am done because I do not want any more, that is different than if they take the carton and they actually drain it, okay, and they finish that carton. There is less food waste and there is more nutrition going into the children.

I will tell you, I think I mentioned, and I have certainly submitted it in my written testimony, that the dairy fat in milk, when it is combined with a protein-fat matrix it is not handled by the body the same way. It is handled a little bit differently. Study after study has shown, and a review of studies has shown, that I mentioned in my submitted testimony, that greater consumption of dairy foods, including whole-fat dairy foods, has been associated with less obesity and less cardiometabolic risk.

Now, I want kids to eat a full meal. I want the whole meal to be consumed. If kids get the options—I am not talking about taking any options away from kids, but I want the full access that they should have, for the range of options of milk that are available. They may come to lunch, or breakfast, because they have the milk they like, but they are going to stay for the meal. That is my goal. They may come for the milk, but I want them to stay for the whole meal, because that is the way I can get a balanced meal into those kids.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Very good. Senator Klobuchar.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you very much, Senator Boozman. Thank you, all of you. I will go to you, Mr. Ayoob. In your testimony you talk about the critical importance of healthy eating, nutrition during childhood, especially with respect to calcium. Can

you explain in more detail why this period of life is so important in terms of nutrition and nutrients?

Dr. AYOUB. Thank you. I would love to, because we do not have our whole lives to build our bone bank. We have the first 25-ish years. Study after study has shown that kids are under-consuming calcium and all the nutrients that are necessary to build bones, and that includes potassium, vitamin D, et cetera. If they skip the milk in school—now, that might seem like it is no big deal for a day, maybe even a week, but if they forego a glass of milk every day they are in school, every day for 12 years, we are going to graduate them with a diploma and not very good bones. We owe our kids better than that.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you.

Dr. AYOUB. Can I add to that just one second? I think it was mentioned earlier that we are going to see earlier osteoporosis, early osteopenia. We always think that is an old people's disease. It is a pediatric disease with adult consequences.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Got it. Thank you. Mrs. Byler, do you believe we have made progress in school meals in recent years, and how?

Mrs. BYLER. Yes, 100 percent. I am seeing success stories with farm-to-school programming, through the Patrick Leahy program, with the Chef Ann Foundation, the Healthy Meals Initiatives. There are a lot of fantastic programs available that have helped school districts. I think that there is a huge movement. I mean, there was a huge movement and it continues to grow for culinary professionals moving school programs. I am seeing—

Senator KLOBUCHAR. We have done meat-cutting in Minnesota. I have been at a bunch of their things, in trailers outside the schools. A lot of knives but it is very good.

Mrs. BYLER. We are seeing local beef in schools. We are seeing local produce. It is really amazing work.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Very good. Thank you. Ms. Dodson, school meals programs support American farmers by receiving a portion of their Federal reimbursement as a commodity credit. Can you talk about how you use this credit, how it supports families in Georgia?

Dr. DODSON. Absolutely. It is a huge factor. In Georgia, we have a goal of at least 20 percent of our school meals being sourced locally in Georgia. Of course, most recently, from the Local Foods for School Initiative, we know we have spent almost \$5 million in addition to the USDA foods that are sourced through our DoD Fresh Program, and that program, we are serving about \$6 million worth of local produce through that program, as well as additional purchases that are made at the local level. There is a lot of Georgia food being served on Georgia trays.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you. Mr. Gorman, I like your enthusiastic testimony down there. You have said that community eligibility has made as much of an impact on school meals as anything you have seen in your 25 years as a school food director. Can you talk about why community eligibility stands out as a positive force for schools?

Mr. GORMAN. You know, I have noticed, in my career, in the 26 years it has really been the last five years where I have been able

to have been qualified for the CEP program, and I have noticed the difference of really just the time I have to do things and the time my staff has to do things.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Yes.

Mr. GORMAN. In the last five years, with some farm-to-school—

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Red tape.

Mr. GORMAN [continuing]. Red tape. We are able to focus on school meals and the food in front of the kids.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. You also talk in your testimony about the fact that SNAP cuts would undermine your ability to serve kids through the community eligibility. I had asked this earlier and our USDA expert, who I respect, was going to get back to us on that. That is something right in front of us right now, as some of my colleagues have pointed out. Can you talk about why this is the case and what the impact would be?

Mr. GORMAN. You know, SNAP is the way most of our children qualify for school meals, and if they come off of that program then they could not qualify for school meals. What that does is that returns hunger to the classroom, and hunger is humiliating for a child, embarrassing, painful, and most likely unnecessary.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Last, just back to you Ms. Dodson, some people have proposed raising the threshold for community eligibility from 25 percent to 60 percent of low-income students. Can you talk about the impact of such a change to Georgia, and can you estimate how many schools and students would lose access to school meals if such a change were made?

Dr. DODSON. Yes, ma'am. Currently we have 1,296 schools out of our 2,300 that operate the Community Eligibility Provision in Georgia, and this has been a tremendous amount of growth. We would lose, potentially, 350 of those schools with that change, and with the further changes with SNAP that could be an even greater factor moving forward. About half a million children, potentially, would lose access.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you for your thoughtful testimony, all four of you, and thank you, Senator Boozman.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Marshall.

Senator MARSHALL. Thank you again, Chairman Boozman and Ranking Member Klobuchar, and again, Senator Welch, my co-leader on this legislation. Welcome to all the panel members and thank you for taking time out of your day for something obviously that is important and near and dear to all your hearts, so I appreciate it.

I want to start off with Chef Byler. Can I call you Chef?

Mrs. BYLER. Yes.

Senator MARSHALL. Okay. I did not get to hear all your testimony. I am reviewing it here. It sounds to me like when you offer students a choice of milks, consumption goes up. Can you just speak really quickly to that again, giving them choices?

Mrs. BYLER. Sure. Yes, absolutely. The milk that we were ordering increased by 50 percent, and the waste decreased by 95 percent during the trial years, the year that we did.

Senator MARSHALL. That is incredible. I mean, it is absolutely incredible, and it is amazing when we do a little education, a little

coaching, a little teaching, and a few choices, that eventually the consumer makes these choices.

When you are considering the cost of a student's meal, the lunches that you are in charge of, I am sure you do have to think about cost a little bit. I hate to ask a question I do not know the answer, but is milk an expensive item, or how does the cost of milk formulate into that school lunch program as you think about the cost of the nutritious lunch you are serving?

Mrs. BYLER. Sure. I mean, nationwide we have about \$4.50 to put a lunch together, and that includes everything, all of our overhead costs. In Pennsylvania, where I am at, in northwestern Pennsylvania, the cost of milk is about 27 cents.

Senator MARSHALL. For a carton?

Mrs. BYLER. Correct. Yes.

Senator MARSHALL. I just remember, again, growing, like Peter said, at 10 every morning the milk lady came in. They were a nickel, and I had a dime to spend on them, and had an extra milk ticket to punch at lunch because my parents wanted me to have extra milk, and I still credit milk to so many great things, as well.

What is your advice to us that we are missing so far as we try to bring, in my opinion, whole milk back to the school?

Mrs. BYLER. I think it was said very well several times today. We can do better. I think if we just bring back the milk choice to schools we would see a huge increase in consumption, a huge decrease in waste, and satisfaction for our students, would be through the roof.

Senator MARSHALL. One of the choices would be whole milk.

Mrs. BYLER. Absolutely.

Senator MARSHALL. Right, as well.

Dr. AYOOB. I want to talk to you a second. I am the OB. I got to bring the baby in. You are a pediatrician, right?

Dr. AYOOB. I am not a medical doctor. I am a doctor of nutrition.

Senator MARSHALL. Of nutrition. For some reason I thought you were in pediatrics. I do not know where I got that. You started talking about osteopenia and osteoporosis, and I just want to drive this home. There is just nothing more frustrating, challenging in my life when an elderly woman has osteoporosis and her vertebrae have collapsed. Really, I mean, they are in horrible pain, they are in the emergency room. It is not like replacing a hip. I cannot go in there and help those folks out. Just speak a little bit more what you are seeing clinically when it comes to osteopenia and porosis, and how important it is that you reach your maximum density around 26, 28, and then it is downhill from there unless you are taking some pretty aggressive medications.

Dr. AYOOB. I can tell you, my clinic deals mostly with kids, but I see what happens with their parents, who are young parents who did not grow up with drinking a lot of milk. They do suffer. They do pay the price. Knee problems, hip problems, et cetera.

I take dietary histories on all the kids that I see, and I always want to focus on the balance of nutrient that kids are getting. If I see food groups that are missing, that is a red flag for me. I always ask them, I say, "Do you drink the milk in school?" and I want to find out why. They say, "Well, I don't like it." I know what kind of milk is offered. It is skim and one percent. It may not be

what they are used to. That is a missed opportunity. That is just a missed opportunity.

Now some kids will drink the milk fine, and I am not worried about taking away options. I just want to make sure that the full spread of options is there so that kids can get the milk that they want and they can actually drink the entire carton of it.

Senator MARSHALL. Yes. I meant to ask Chef Byler what the options were at school these days, but I still want to just—I mean, sodas, sugar sodas, are not just neutral when it comes to osteoporosis and penia. It is actually going the wrong direction. Go ahead.

Dr. AYOOB. Can I speak one second? Also, if kids do not get the kind of milk they drink, they are going to end the school day with eight hours less fluid. They are going to be thirsty. They are going to be hungry because there is protein and nutrition in that milk. They are going to go right down to the corner, at least where I live in New York City, and they are going to go buy some 24-ounce bottle of swill, that is basically sugar water and—

Senator MARSHALL. Yes, because milk is, what, is it 80 percent water, 90 percent—

Dr. AYOOB. Yes, A bottle of something—

Senator MARSHALL. Something to get hydrated.

Dr. AYOOB [continuing]. that is going to have, first of all, more sugar than they get in an entire week in school, but even then, it has got no nutrition in it. That is losing.

Senator MARSHALL. Yes. Emphasizing, soda is not just—you do not lose benefits of milk. It is actually soda is really hard on your bones. Is that right, Chef Byler?

Mrs. BYLER. Yes.

Senator MARSHALL. Okay. I better yield back. Thank you so much.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Senator Welch.

Senator WELCH. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. You know, one of reasons I so appreciate this Committee, led by you and Senator Klobuchar, is the kind of witnesses we get. I mean, you guys are doing good work. I really appreciate it. You know, I am thinking about you, and you have found a way, that suited your schedule, and then you turned it into this incredible career that has been so beneficial not just for your kids but for kids all over the country. That is pretty impressive. Each of you has been so committed to doing practical things on the local level, community level, where there is so much pressure in our communities that pull families apart, that make it tough for parents managing with their kids going to school, that they worry about how they are doing there, and food is so essential.

I just wanted to express to each of you my gratitude for the work that you are doing.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, our job is to make their job easier, not harder. We fail in that a lot of times, but this Committee is really committed to trying to do everything we can.

I will start by just asking Ms. Dodson, put it in the context of broader issues than just milk, but the nutrition programs. We have debates here about funding any kind of program, and that is fair and square. I literally have not heard a witness, including the most

fiscally conservative folks here, who have anything that they object to with respect to school nutrition. You know, we have a debate about whether it should be needs-based or whatever, but in addition to the fundamentally beneficial effect of having kids get good nutrition at school, I have always felt there is a socialization element to that, you know, kids having a meal together, sharing milk together, which is so much a part of not only building a good body but good character.

Maybe you could just comment a little bit about the benefits you see.

Dr. DODSON. Yes, sir. I think school meals have a unique opportunity, as I mentioned. I honestly believe it could be a tremendous solution for our Nation's health, give the opportunity to model healthy eating, expose children to a wide variety of locally grown foods especially, that are healthy and nutritious. We have seen the combination of that with nutrition education, or what we call food-based learning, is a way to bring education lessons alive. Also it gets students more comfortable with the food choices that they are being served as part of school meals, because they are not always seeing those at home, in their regular diet. They are not always exposed to fresh fruits and vegetables like we have the opportunity to provide them with at school.

I think education has that opportunity, and school nutrition can kind of be that educational hub, if you will, and a foundation for children within their school day.

Senator WELCH. Thank you. Mr. Gorman, my predecessor in the U.S. Senate from Vermont is that man who is staring at us right from his picture up there, former Chairman of the Agriculture Committee, Patrick Leahy, whom we in Vermont are very proud of all he did. One of his many accomplishments was the Patrick Leahy Farm-to-School and Local Food for Schools Cooperative Program. That was terminated for the rest of this fiscal year, and my understanding is it will be reinstated next year.

Can you just comment on the benefit of Senator Leahy's legacy program that was supported with a strong bipartisan majority in the U.S. Senate?

Mr. GORMAN. Yes. Thank you for that question. It really is. We were a recipient of the grant probably five or six years ago, and we had applied this coming year and got that notice that it was canceled, so it was really crushing to us. You know, it is a jumpstart to local food movements. I think about over our past 10, 15 years, it started us building toward figuring out the local infrastructure and getting more local food and starting school gardens.

Over the past five years, we have gotten private and public grants in our county, over \$2 million, to move on this issue, to get kids so they understand what local food is, to make those connections. We are starting a food processing plant in Muskegon County with the goal of getting local Michigan potatoes diced and frozen, so we can get them on every plate in Muskegon County and beyond. All of that started with that Farm-to-School Grant that we got 10 years ago as a cooperative, to start putting those pieces together.

Senator WELCH. Thank you very much. Before I yield back I just want to say, this Committee has an opportunity to help the Senate

be a better Senate, and I think one of the things we can do is take some of these specific bills that we agree on and move them, like this whole milk, Senator Marshall's Whole Milk Bill. I am just going to suggest to the Chairman to give that some thought. We can move this before we get a full farm bill. Let's get some things done that we think make sense to get done, and help our farmers and help our kids.

I yield back.

Chairman BOOZMAN. Well, thanks to the panel for being here. I agree with the Senator from Vermont when he said that you all do good work. I was very impressed, as was the rest of the Committee, by your testimony and your thoughtfulness.

With that, the record will remain open for five business days, and today's hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:50 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

APRIL 1, 2025

For release only by the
Senate Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

STATEMENT OF
DR. EVE STOODY
DIRECTOR OF THE NUTRITION GUIDANCE AND ANALYSIS DIVISION
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON
AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY
UNITED STATES SENATE

Evidence continues to support dairy as an important part of a healthy dietary pattern, and yet, for about 90% of the U.S. population, dairy intakes fall below recommendations. Dietary intake data has shown reductions in intake over time, which sets the stage for nutrient shortfalls, particularly for calcium and vitamin D.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025 states that healthy dietary patterns feature dairy, including milk, yogurt, and cheese. The Dietary Guidelines also recommends that most dairy choices should be fat-free or low-fat and with no to little added sugars. The dairy group also includes low-lactose and lactose-free dairy products as well as fortified soy beverages (or “soy milk”) and soy yogurt—which are fortified with calcium, vitamin A, and vitamin D. Dairy recommendations have been relatively consistent in the Dietary Guidelines since the first edition in 1980. More recent editions have evolved to include low-lactose, lactose-free, and soy options.

A key driver for the inclusion of dairy in a healthy dietary pattern is to meet nutrient needs, particularly for calcium. Dairy is also a key contributor to intakes of vitamin D. This is important given the goal that the Dietary Guidelines meet nutrient needs by aligning with Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs) defined by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM). DRIs are a set of scientifically developed nutrient reference values that support the health of Americans. Each value has different uses, such as meeting nutritional

requirements, preventing excessive intakes, and/or reducing risk of chronic disease.

Recommendations for calcium and vitamin D support bone health as well as other outcomes.

In the healthy dietary pattern recommended by the Dietary Guidelines, the dairy group contributes 60-80% of the total calcium across all age groups starting at 12 months of age. The dairy food group also contributes 55-75% of the total vitamin D in the patterns for all age groups starting at 12 months of age. Beyond calcium and vitamin D, dairy, if consumed in recommended amounts, would also contribute 15% or more to the total nutrient content for more than a dozen additional nutrients across most calorie levels. Recent analyses by the 2025 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee explored what would happen if the recommendations for the dairy group were reduced. Based on the results of their analyses, the Committee did not pursue proposed reductions in dairy because of the negative implications on nutrients for many groups, especially children and adolescents and older adults—both groups that have higher nutrient needs to support bone health.

Nationally-representative data from the USDA's Agricultural Research Service shows that about 90% of the U.S. population does not meet dairy recommendations. The percent of Americans who drink milk as a beverage on a given day is 65% among young children, 34% in adolescents, and about 20% for adults.

Data also suggests that intakes have been declining over time, particularly during adolescence, a life stage when bone health is of particular importance. Among adolescents, the percent reporting milk intake was 76% in 1977-1978, which decreased to only 48% in 2005-2006, and 34% in 2015-2016. In more recent data, mean intake of dairy among adolescents in 2017-2018 was significantly lower compared to 2003-2004 (1.7 cup eq per day vs. 2.2 cup eq per

day)—a reduction of ½ cup equivalent per day. For all children, more dairy is consumed as higher fat milk (e.g., 2% or whole milk) verses fat-free or low-fat versions.

The current Dietary Guidelines includes daily limits for saturated fat and added sugars. Similar to calcium and vitamin D, the DRIs have also addressed added sugars and saturated fat. Work to update the DRIs for the macronutrients is underway. As part of that work, DRIs for saturated fat and added sugars will be addressed. The update is expected in time for the 2030-2035 edition of the Dietary Guidelines.

USDA's school meal programs support the consumption of milk among children. Under current school meal nutrition standards, schools must offer a variety (at least two options) of milk with breakfast and lunch. Schools may currently offer flavored and unflavored low-fat (1%), fat-free, and lactose-free milk, which is consistent with the recommendations of the current Dietary Guidelines, including recommended limits for added sugars.

The Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025 would change the permissible milk types that may be offered in school meals to include those recommended by the current Dietary Guidelines—fat-free and low-fat milk—and also reduced-fat and whole milk. The bill would also exempt milk fat from saturated fat limits in school meals. Currently, more than 80% of children and adolescents exceed the recommendation to limit saturated fat intake to less than 10% of calories per day. Without shifts in other foods and beverages, providing students with the option to choose milk with higher saturated fat could result in saturated fat intakes far exceeding current recommendations.

Under current school meal nutrition standards, saturated fat from foods and beverages offered in school meals is limited to no more than 10% of calories per week. Exempting milk from the overall weekly saturated fat limit may add complexity to the programs. Schools would need to

"count" milk toward other daily and weekly meal pattern standards, such as weekly calorie limits, but would need to exempt milk from saturated fat limits. State agencies would need to ensure schools include, or exclude, milk correctly, depending on the requirement.

Schools are already required to provide a substitute for fluid milk when a student cannot consume fluid milk due to a disability, based on submission of a medical statement.

Low dairy intakes have set the stage for calcium and vitamin D to be among several nutrients of public health concern. Supporting efforts to increase dairy intakes would, in turn, improve nutrient intakes and support health across the lifespan. Offering dairy during school meals supports consumption directly and can set the stage for consuming a healthy dietary pattern outside of school meals.

Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry

**Legislative Hearing to Review S. 222, the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act, and
Improving Children's Health**

10:00am, Tuesday, April 1st, 2025

Location: 328A Russell Senate Office Building

Hearing Witness

**Keith T. Ayoob, EdD, RD, FAND
Associate Clinical Professor Emeritus
Department of Pediatrics
Albert Einstein College of Medicine
New York, NY**

Thank you to Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and the Committee for the opportunity to speak to you about the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act (S. 222).

I am Dr. Keith T. Ayoob, Associate Professor Emeritus of Pediatrics at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. For 33 years I directed the Nutrition Clinic as part of the Children's Evaluation and Rehabilitation Center, a large diagnostic and treatment center at Einstein. I am also a registered dietitian/nutritionist (RDN). I have been a clinician for over 30 years, and we serve mostly low-income minority children and families in the Bronx. Testifying before Congress is not typically part of my job. I am here because this issue matters to the children I see, so it matters to me.

Why Milk is in School Meals

Let me first address why milk is essential in school meals. Nearly 30 million children and adolescents participate in federal school meal programs every day, including breakfast and lunch. Milk in school meals offers 13 essential nutrients, including high-quality protein, calcium, phosphorous, vitamin D, and potassium, and is the number-one source of protein, vitamin D, calcium, and potassium for children ages 2-18. A plethora of scientific literature demonstrates that consumption of cow's milk provides children with better bone health, a lower risk for type 2 diabetes, and a lower risk for cardiovascular disease. Specifically, milk provides 22% of the calcium, 40% of the vitamin D and 10% of the potassium in the American diet. In sum, milk—including Whole Milk (3.25% milkfat), Reduced Fat (2%), Low Fat (1%), Skim (fat free), and lactose-free varieties—represents a nutrient package not found in any other single food or beverage.

Multiple versions of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend increased intake of dairy products and identify dairy as an under-consumed food group.(DGA) This is true even

of many school age children, with between 68% and 76.2% of school age males and between 77.4% and 94.3% of school age females failing to meet recommended levels of dairy consumption. Among youth ages 9-13, 79 percent fall short of the Dietary Guideline's recommended dairy intake.(Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee. 2020.)

School meals The School Breakfast Program provides 40% of the dairy needed by students each day and the National School Lunch Program provides 47%. We also know that most children prefer Whole Milk (3.25% milkfat) and Reduced Fat Fat (2%) milk.

Enactment of the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act would bring nutritious Whole Milk (3.25% milkfat) and Reduced Fat (2%) milk back to schools. Because most kids prefer the taste of these two milk varieties, I believe that milk consumption and school meals participation will increase if this bill is passed, leading to improved nutritional outcomes for our children.

Saturated Fat

Whole Milk (3.25% milkfat) and Reduced Fat (2%) Milk were served in schools for decades but were removed from school menus in 2010. As I understand it, lawmakers at the time wanted to keep saturated fat levels in school meals low, below 10% on average, to help reduce the risk of heart disease. I support risk reduction for heart disease. Let me explain why I have a hard time supporting fewer milk options in school.

Historically, we have viewed “saturated fat” monolithically, even though there are many different sources of saturated fats in our food. Since 2010, when Whole and Reduced Fat milk were removed as school meal options, the body of credible nutrition science has evolved and no longer supports a policy of allowing only fat-free and low-fat milk in schools.

A systematic review of studies that looked at cardiometabolic health in children ages 2 to 18 years found that consumption of dairy products including Whole and Reduced Fat milk had no association with cardiometabolic risk. (O'Sullivan, 2020)

Nutrition is not a static science. It is dynamic. It should be. We should constantly be learning, revising, and fine tuning our recommendations, as credible science keeps evolving. I am required to do at least 75 hours of continuing education every 5 years in order to maintain my RDN credential and to keep current with nutrition science.

I will also tell you that I did not come to my position quickly or without careful thought and scrutiny of the evidence. It's not easy for me to change my views about nutrition. As a pediatric nutritionist, I advised parents for years to withhold introduction of potentially allergenic foods until the age of 2 to 3 years, if their infant had a higher risk of being food-

allergic. Then, credible research came along that totally upended my position: introduce potentially allergenic foods as soon as other solids are introduced, which means at 6 months of age, because this significantly reduced the likelihood of allergic reactions. If you think I did that easily, I did not. But I also knew I had to look at the credible evidence, and that evidence made the difference.

Even the 2025 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, when examining the relationship between food sources of saturated fat, made a specific conclusion addressing dairy that found, “No association between substituting or replacing one form of dairy with another form of dairy on CVD. This included comparisons between milk, yogurt, cheese & buttermilk.” And when looking at the science on milk’s effect on growth and risk of obesity in children, the DGAC identified some evidence that, “Consumption of higher-fat dairy milk compared to lower-fat dairy milk by younger children may be associated with favorable growth and body composition, and lower risk of obesity during childhood.”

Several years ago, the Australian Heart Foundation revised their position statement to include dairy foods at all fat levels, unless there is presence of elevated blood cholesterol.

Saturated fat doesn’t exist in isolation in foods. In dairy, it is bound to protein, occurring in a “dairy matrix.” In this form, the body appears to handle it differently. Dairy foods that contain protein in this dairy matrix do not seem to produce the negative cardiometabolic effects that other saturated fats do; when they are in a protein-fat network that occurs in dairy foods like milk, yogurt, and cheese, they appear not to increase bad cholesterol and to lower the harmful portion of bad cholesterol. Can other foods lower bad cholesterol and reduce CVD risk? Absolutely, but they’re not able to provide the 13 essential nutrients in milk. (Dunne, 2023; de Goeds, 2015; Nicholl, 2021; Schmidt, 2021)

Obesity

I work primarily with Black and Hispanic children. Obesity rates are higher in this population. That said, obesity prevalence in 2010 was 17% (<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db82.htm>). It’s even higher in the population I work with – about 25% in each of these groups (<https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood-obesity-facts/childhood-obesity-facts.html>).

Numerous systematic reviews have found higher fat milk consumption to be associated with lower childhood obesity. (O’Sullivan, 2020; Dougkas, 2019; Kang, 2019)

Obesity is a complex, multi-faceted issue. There seems to be a tendency for various groups to blame obesity on a single food or ingredient: sugar, junk food, soda, high-fructose corn syrup, and so on. It’s not that simple. Moreover, since the removal of Whole Milk and

Reduced Fat milk in schools, obesity prevalence has increased. Clearly, milk was not the issue here. It wasn't the cause and it's not the cure.

Taking this a step further, if children are not drinking milk at school because the school doesn't have the type of milk they prefer, one would postulate that they would lose weight. There's no evidence this is happening or that it has happened for this reason.

When a food has more calories than a comparator food, it's easy to assume that substituting a lower calorie option would help curb overall calorie intake. This is not always the case for a number of reasons. For example, those who consume nuts daily (most research has been done on almonds, walnuts, peanuts and pistachios) tend to be less at risk for being overweight and obesity. With milk, research has consistently shown that consumers of whole milk are no more likely to be overweight or obese (Nicholl et al, 2021). In terms of other health risks, higher dairy consumption, irrespective of dairy fat content, has been associated with lower risk for insulin resistance syndrome (Pereira et al, 2002).

Many of my patients over the years, especially adolescents and teens, have told me that the school meal doesn't always leave them feeling full. The relatively small amount of fat in Whole Milk, amounting to two scant teaspoons of total fat of which only about a teaspoon is saturated, can provide a satiating effect for some students, especially those who consume Whole Milk and Reduced Fat Milk at home.

Calcium Crisis

No matter what type of milk is offered in school, none of it is nutritious unless students drink it. And they don't drink it often enough. The reason the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee considers calcium, potassium, and vitamin D as "nutrients of concern" is because the vast majority of Americans do not consume the recommended amounts of these nutrients. A glass of dairy milk has 3 of these 4 nutrients of concern. Missing that glass of milk at lunch is not likely to be made up during the rest of the day.

Some policymakers assume that "if schools don't serve the type of milk children want, then over time they'll drink the milk that is offered." The assumption is that the children will adapt over time. That may work at home but it doesn't work in school. Kids will adapt – but not the way we'd like them to. They'll adapt by learning to hold off quenching their thirst for a few more hours until the school day is over. Then they'll head to a convenience or corner store and buy a 20- or 24-oz. bottle of some flavored drink that has a ton of added sugar and lots of empty calories.

Moreover, I believe that giving children the kind of milk option they like can encourage participation in the school meals program, and that's my goal. Most of the children I see

are from low-income families. In a study of low-income children, 77% of their daily milk intake comes from school meals (Cullen et al, 2016).

Bringing back milk options that kids like can mean that, while they come back for the milk, they'll stay for the meal, which is my goal. The milk might be a delivery vehicle, as with whole grain cereal and fruit, or simply a great thirst quencher at lunch, that completes the meal. That school meal – breakfast or lunch – may be the most balanced meal they have all day.

In summary, credible evidence has shown that limiting dairy milk options in schools is a solution in search of a problem. Returning Whole (3.25%) and Reduced Fat (2%) milk to school meals and child nutrition by enacting the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act, along with low-fat (1%) and non-fat milk, including lactose-free versions, which are already in these programs, provides more milk options for children to choose from, which will make it easier for them to get all of the nutrients they need in their diets.

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U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

Legislative Hearing to Review S. 222, The Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act,
and Improving Children's Health

April 1, 2025

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar & Members of the Committee,

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to discuss child nutrition with you today. My name is Krista Byler, I am a professional chef with a varied background in food service, for the past 20 years I have been the Foodservice Director for Union City Area School District in Northwestern Pennsylvania. I am the mother of two student athletes and the wife and granddaughter of Pennsylvania farmers. My passion is feeding our future and advocating for school nutrition reform.

During the 2019-2020 school year our district ran a milk choice trial at our middle and high schools in order to gather data for the Pennsylvania Grassroots Dairy committee as well as to see if we could determine whether the ultra-restrictive policies regarding milk in the school meals programs are largely responsible for the loss of a generation of milk drinkers.

At the time of the trial, I had been in the school nutrition business for 14 years and had witnessed a significant decrease in the amount of milk taken with meals as well as a huge increase in milk wasted on a daily basis, beginning in about 2012.

I was interested in conducting this research for many reasons: I hated seeing such an exorbitant amount of milk wasted daily in our small district and was hearing stories of even bigger waste ratios in larger districts. I strongly disagree with the 2010 legislation that has, in effect, allowed a la carte sales of products containing chemicals or caffeine but does not allow nutrient dense 2% or whole milk. Lastly, as the wife and granddaughter of proud Pennsylvania dairymen, I knew how the decrease in milk we were ordering for schools would impact dairy farm families, who work hard every day to produce nutrient dense milk.

The facts from our middle school and high school trial are that we offered all levels of milk fat to our students, and this resulted in:

- 50% increase in milk consumption
- 95% reduction in milk waste
- 63.6% of the students who responded to our survey chose milk more often since they had the option to choose which milk fit their needs
- 84.7% of the students who responded to our survey drink whole milk at home (What about the students who fully rely on school meals as their best option for nutrition all day and are not getting this at home? Are we failing those students even more?)

The survey results show that something as simple as offering two additional milk fat options within school meals can significantly change the amount of milk chosen, consumed and not discarded. That's a win for students, schools, farmers, and the environment.

As a member of the School Nutrition Association and Pittsburgh Regional Food Service Directors' buying group I have the opportunity to network with school nutrition directors from all over Pennsylvania and the United States. The one thing that stands out to me is the passion that all of the directors have for feeding their students. Whether they feed 1,000 or 100,000 students, the goal is the same to prepare our students to learn and grow. I am seeing amazing things happening all across the country to change the landscape of what school food looks like. Farm-to-school, local purchasing, scratch cooking, school gardens, hydroponics labs and a variety of other initiatives are happening in school cafeterias all over the United States. I am so proud to see our school meals programs offering nutrient dense, wholesome food that is restaurant quality to our students.

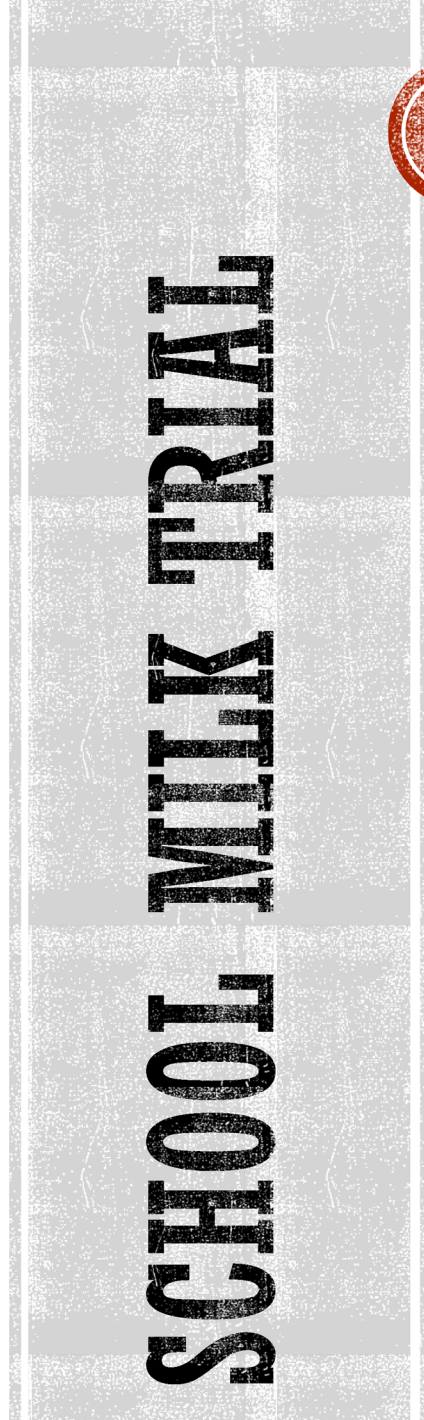
With the Community Eligibility program uncertainty, the loss of Local Food for Schools funding and rising food costs, school food programs that are making this effort instead of relying on highly processed and prepacked foods may be forced to scale back or abandon scratch cooking, local procurement efforts and nutrition education outreach. This undermines years of progress toward improving the quality of school meals and bipartisan goals to improve children's health. These cuts will also hurt our farming communities where partnerships were formed with schools.

<https://farmtoschoolcensus.fns.usda.gov/>

Please help our students have access to nourishing school food that fuels both body and mind. I believe access to good quality; nutrient dense food is a basic right of education. I will continue to advocate for school meals for all as I have seen the cascade of benefits and believe child nutrition can unite lawmakers across the aisle.

I want to impress upon you today that our youth need your help, they need you, our elected officials to take note and take action! We cannot afford to continue to watch and wait! Please be the change makers that our students need. Bring back our permission to offer milk fat choices in schools, including nutrient-dense whole milk, which, by the way, is just 3.25 to 3.5% fat!

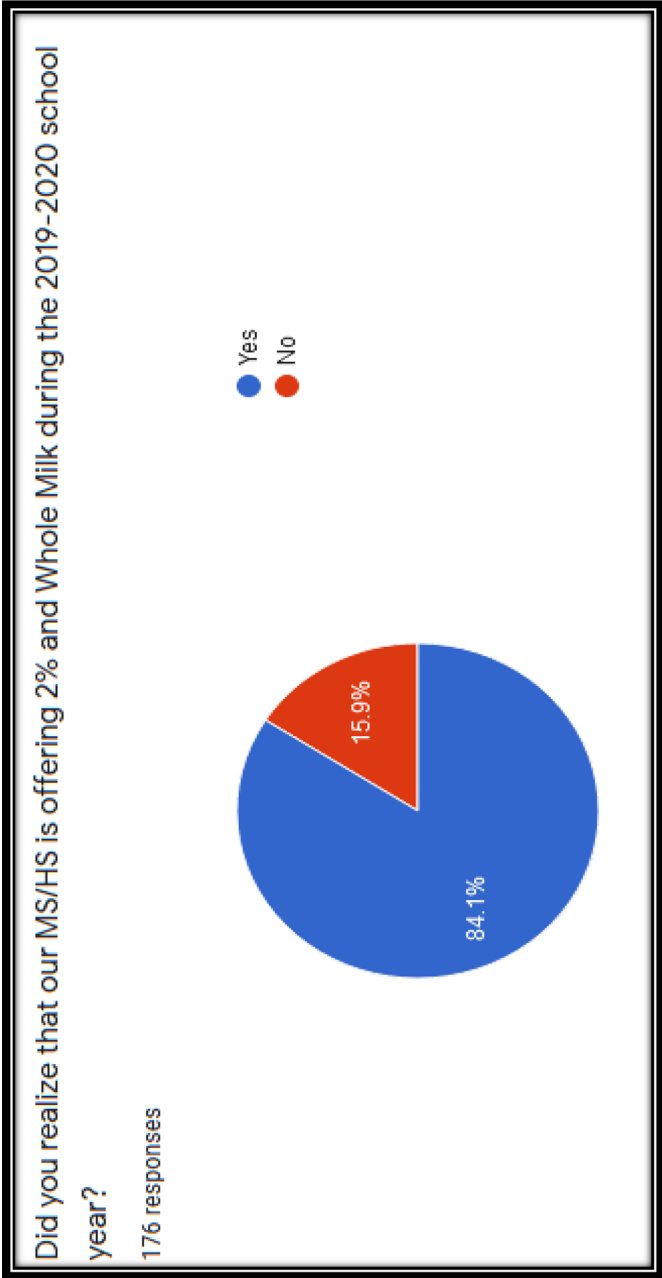
Thank you again for the opportunity to speak, I welcome any questions you may have.

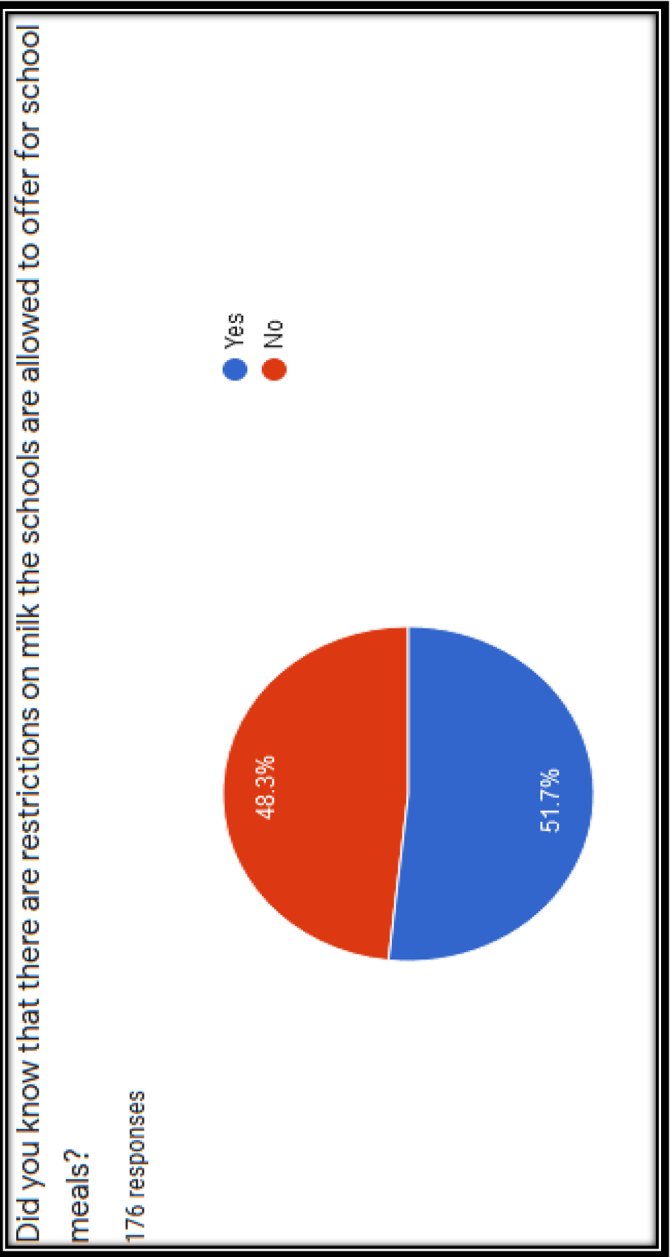


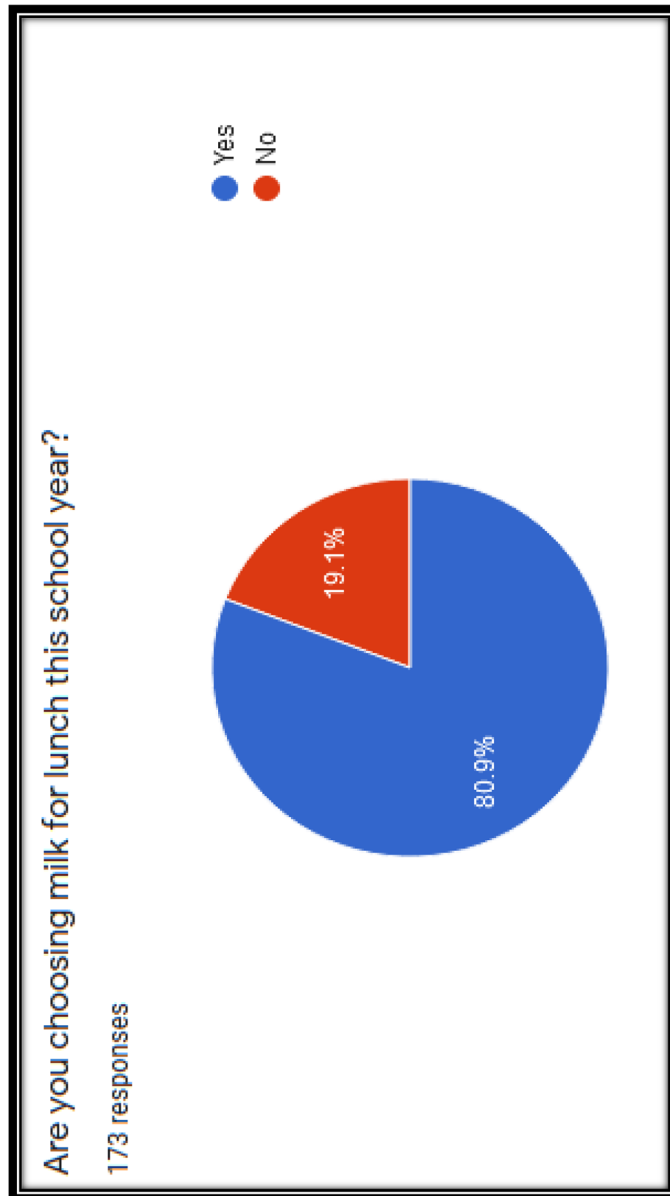
SCHOOL MILK TRIAL

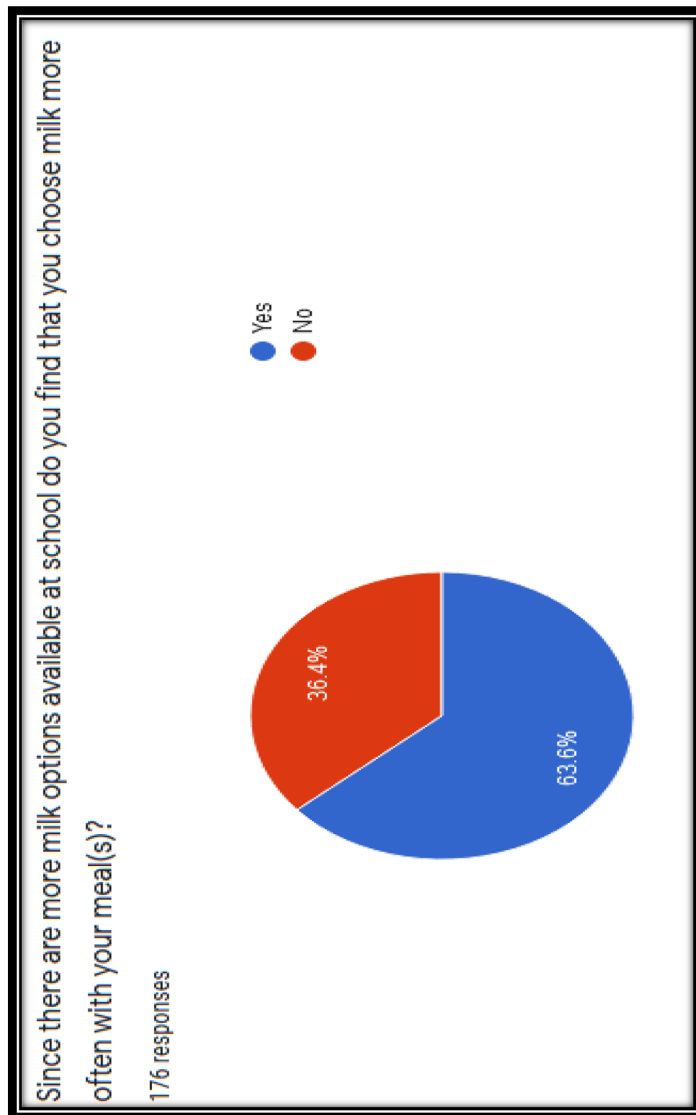
- In 2019-2020 All Milk Fat Varieties including Skim, 1%, 2%, and Whole Unflavored & Chocolate Milks were offered to all Middle & High School Students for the entire school year
- There was no marketing or promotion involved, we simply offered milk to students
- In the Spring of 2020 we sent out a survey to our Middle & High School Students, these are the results

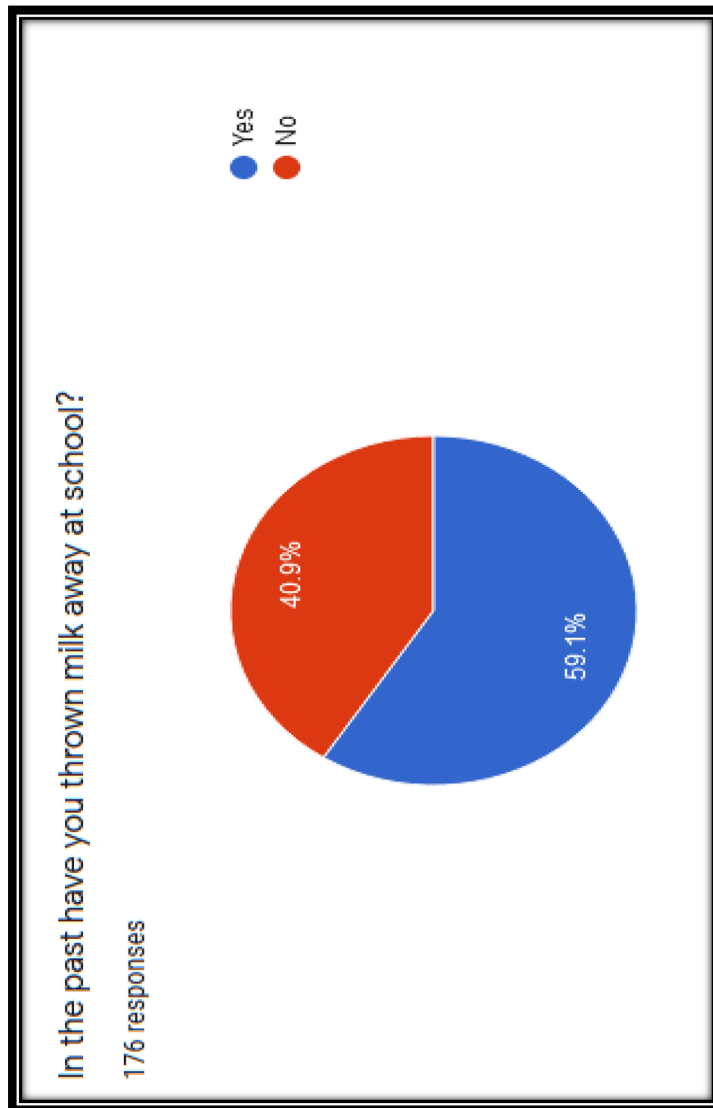


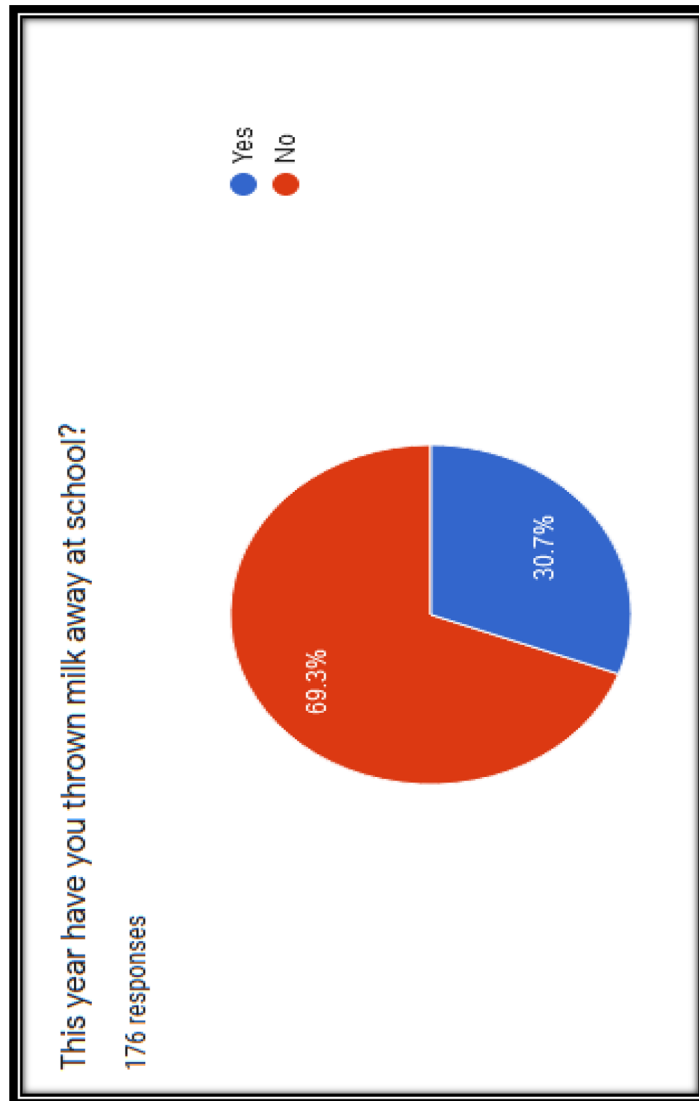


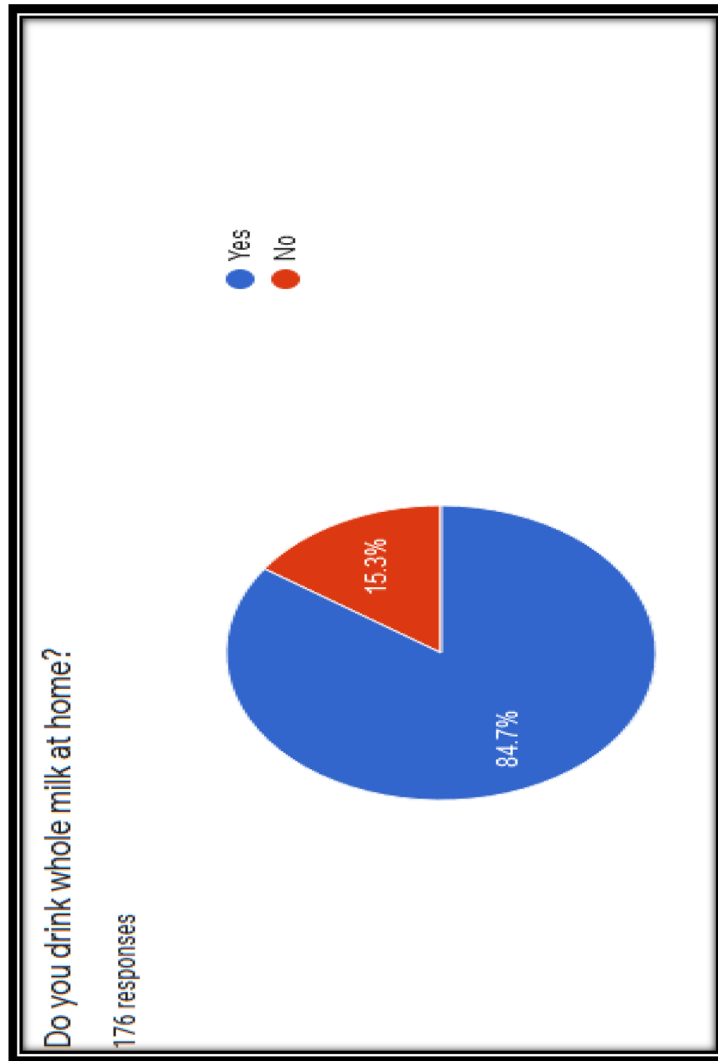












**ACTUAL WASTE WAS CALCULATED THROUGH COLLECTION OF
UNUSED MILK VS. MILK TAKEN WITH MEALS IN 2018-2019
SCHOOL YEAR COMPARED TO 2019-2020 SCHOOL YEAR**



Our Student Council participated in a Recycling Program which required all unconsumed milk to be poured into “milk buckets” so that the empty cartons could be sent to the recycling program. This allowed us to measure the amount of milk wasted daily.





**THE RESULTS WERE ASTOUNDING!
MILK WASTE WAS REDUCED FROM
3 GALLONS ON AVERAGE PER DAY
IN 2018-2019 TO AN AVERAGE OF
19 OUNCES IN THE 2019-2020
SCHOOL YEAR.**



Written statement of Dr. Linette Dodson, RD, SNS, FAND
Deputy Superintendent of School Nutrition
Georgia Department of Education
Atlanta, Georgia

To the United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry

U.S. Senator John Boozman, Chair
U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar, Ranking Member

School Meal Overview and the Current State of School Meals

April 1, 2025

1562 Twin Towers East
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Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today on the importance of the National School Meal Programs to our nation's school children and share some of the current program challenges. I have been asked today to talk about school meals.

Introduction:

My name is Linette Dodson, and I have the privilege of serving as the Deputy Superintendent of School Nutrition for the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), working with a committed state staff to support our local Georgia School Nutrition Programs. Before coming to the Georgia Department of Education in 2019, I served as a local school nutrition director for a Georgia school district for almost 19 years. I am a registered dietitian who took a position in my children's school district as a local school nutrition director, which led me to finding my passion, school nutrition. I have witnessed the valuable impact the national school meal program has on children at the local school district level and for the past six years at the state level.

History of the School Meal Program:

School meals are a vital source of nutrition for 30 million school-aged children across our country in approximately 100,000 public and private schools. In Georgia, over 1 million school lunches are served in over 2,300 schools. [Food insecurity is a reality for 13.5 percent of households in the United States](#) and school meals are a direct way to ensure all children have access to nutritious meals at school.

In 1946, the National School Lunch Program was founded as a matter of national security because 1 in 4 men were being rejected for military service due to malnutrition. The program was also designed to support American farmers by including the service of United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) commodity foods as part of school meals. USDA foods continue to be a critical part of school meals.

Today our nation not only faces issues with food insecurity, but also issues related to childhood obesity that can lead to long-term health problems. Now obesity impacts potential servicemembers' physical ability to serve in the military. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) in 2021-2023](#) noted that 40.3% of adults over the age of 20 were overweight or obese (2).

School meals are an investment in our children's future, providing science-based nutrition to support their growth, development, and educational success.

Summer Meals:

It's essential to emphasize that providing school meals year-round, including during the summer months when school is not in session, is crucial to meeting the nutritional needs of our nation's children. The Seamless Summer Option (SSO) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provide meals in low-income eligible areas to children 1-18 years old. Historically SSO/SFSP service requires children be present for meals and to consume the majority of the meals onsite. The recent, permanent introduction of the flexibility of non-congregate meals being provided in rural areas has increased accessibility to children whose families were challenged to access daily breakfast and lunch service. Children having direct access to nutritional foods during the summer is crucial and SSO and SFSP meals make that possible.

Current State of School Meals

Funding for School Meals:

The meal program is primarily funded by federal reimbursement for the school meals served and that funding is associated with income eligibility of families based on current poverty rates. Household applications are

required to determine the economic status of families and whether or not the student is eligible to have their meals federally subsidized. School meals are provided and local districts submit claims with a breakdown of the free, reduced, and paid meals served to students. State agencies submit these claim requests to USDA for the districts to receive reimbursement. [The current lunch reimbursement rates are \\$4.43 for free meals, \\$4.03 for reduced price meals and \\$.42 for paid meals](#), with the potential addition of performance-based cash assistance for an additional \$.09 per meal. Free breakfast is reimbursed at \$2.37, reduced price breakfast at \$2.07 and paid breakfast at \$.39.

This funding must cover the expenses of operating the program that include purchasing food, supplies, labor and benefits, as well as equipment. According to the [2023 School Nutrition Trends Report](#) issued by the School Nutrition Association, the top three challenges school nutrition programs are facing include increased costs, staff shortages and menu item shortages. [For a student to receive free meals in the 2025 school year, a family of three would need to have an income of \\$34,000 or less](#). In my conversations with school nutrition directors in Georgia, they consistently report that increased reimbursement would greatly enhance their ability to improve the quality of the meals they provide.

Expanding School Meal Access:

School meals are the only part of the school day that is directly associated with family economic status. During the COVID pandemic, school meals were offered at no cost to children throughout the country. More children ate school meals because the economic barrier was temporarily removed.

In school year 2023, districts were required to return to evaluating family income status and charging families for reduced and/or paid price meals. Families, many of whom are just outside the income guidelines, are challenged to cover these costs resulting in growing unpaid meal charges for families and limiting access for many school children.

Community Eligibility Provision (CEP):

CEP allows the nation's highest poverty schools and districts to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without collecting household applications. Student meal participation significantly increases when the economic barrier is removed. In Georgia, there are currently 170 school food authorities providing school meals under the CEP option in 1296 schools. This has allowed greater student access and removed the economic stigma that is many times associated with school meals because of federal income determinations. Additionally, this frees up staff time to focus on student-centered services like nutrition education.

Many states have adopted universal free meals to improve access to school meals. The CEP threshold has allowed states to utilize federal funding and, in many cases, expand state funding to support the service of school meals to children in their states at no cost to families.

Labor and Food Costs:

Just as consumers are challenged by rising food prices, so are our local school nutrition programs. Many foods served as part of school meals are made specifically to meet the nutritional program requirements, which can result in limited availability of those products.

School meal items are required to be sourced from the United States, but limited crop production, especially for items that are required to meet the nutritional requirements of the meal pattern, result in local districts having to pay higher prices. The "Buy American" requirements that are starting with the 2026 School Year require tracking of food purchases with a targeted limit of 10% being non-domestically sourced. Post-COVID

distribution networks are already stressed, especially in rural areas. This requirement will make it even more challenging for programs to purchase necessary foods while meeting meal patterns.

Labor costs have also continued to increase, compounded by rising costs of employee benefits. Many local school districts are sourcing temporary labor to avoid having to cover staff benefits, making it difficult to sustain a trained workforce. Staff turnover not only increases labor costs, but it also creates a less efficient workforce. Effectively training staff to prepare school meals is more critical than ever.

Training a Skilled Workforce:

The complexity of the school meal program standards necessitates extensive staff training to ensure that school nutrition professionals have the ability to plan, purchase and prepare healthy school meals. Ongoing training on the regulations and requirements of the meal program is necessary for school nutrition professionals to be successful and reduce staff turnover; it also creates challenges to maintain an effective workforce. Program directors and school managers also must meet [federal hiring standards based on school system enrollment](#).

Local Foods:

School meals provide a variety of foods including whole grain rich, lean meats, a variety of fruits and vegetables and milk. All children should have access to quality, nutritious meals that include locally sourced foods, especially fresh fruits and vegetables. Using local foods has improved the quality of school meals and provided direct support for local farmers.

Although local foods have been allowed to be purchased for inclusion in school meals, the federal regulatory requirements have intimidated local school nutrition leaders. The most recent Local Foods for Schools funding encouraged local directors to expand procurement opportunities to seek new sources of minimally processed local foods. These funds resulted in distribution sources that included purchasing directly from farmers and menu expansion with new local food items being added to school menus. The additional funds also assisted with the higher cost of the food items being purchased, improving the quality of foods being offered as part of school meals.

Farm to School:

Farm to school engagement has also resulted in higher quality school meals with increased consumption of fruits and vegetables. The Farm to School grants provide additional funding to school districts to expand the scope of school meals and include farm to school engagement that goes beyond what is provided by the meal reimbursement.

Grants like the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program have introduced fruit and vegetable snacks to elementary school children, improving acceptability and consumption of those food items in the meal program. Many children do not have access to a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables as part of their meals at home, so an early introduction to these foods is important. The addition of food education helps students learn more about these foods, and often these programs help connect local farmers to their community members; students really have an opportunity to understand where the food comes from.

Kitchen Equipment:

Food production requires the use of specialized kitchen equipment. Many schools have been built with limited resources and many school kitchens have kitchen equipment that is decades old. Not having the right equipment limits the ability of staff to prepare school meals with fresh ingredients. Federal equipment grants have been a valuable source of funding for school kitchens across the nation to improve and update their

equipment resources, but these grants only scratch the surface of the need for new equipment and facility upgrades nationwide.

Georgia Innovation:

Now that I have been able to help describe the current state of school meals, I'd like to pivot to best practices that we operate in Georgia. Georgia school districts have embraced the opportunity to move forward in innovative ways, meeting the nutritional needs of their students.

The Georgia K-12 culinary culture of school meals has expanded. The complexities of the meal pattern, in addition to extensive regulatory requirements, has resulted in a shift with the focus from the federal program requirements being the standard to a greater opportunity to serve our students quality school meals that meet student expectations. School meals should look good and taste good.

Federal requirements exist with federal funding, however providing quality school meals means the incorporation of fresh local foods, applying culinary techniques, food safety standards with good customer service to create a school meal experience. Requirements must be met, but the standard should be greater than just meeting requirements and for Georgia, it is a quality school meal being provided to every student in Georgia, in every school, every day.

Our state team continues to provide multiple trainings on program requirements, in addition to culinary training and support with the expertise of three Johnson and Wales Chefs that have minimally completed their bachelor's degree. These chefs have piloted culinary support schools across our state helping districts improve the presentation and preparation of their school meals. Lessons learned from working with these local districts have resulted in monthly recorded culinary training being provided, so that even small rural school districts have access to this support.

Challenged with staff turnover, the value of these culinary training resources is being applied throughout the state. This year's culinary support schools have seen an increase of 20% in lunch participation and over 10% at breakfast by applying these culinary principles.

The Georgia Tray of the Week social media campaign was started as a way to showcase quality school meals being served in Georgia schools. Each week up to six submitted student trays are presented on Facebook for the public to vote for their favorite school lunch. Over 1 million participants have engaged to support this initiative, becoming more knowledgeable about the importance of school meals and see what is possible. "Seeing is believing" when you see the amazing examples of school meals served by dedicated local school nutrition staff.

In addition, our state agency has launched a Culinary website that contains numerous resources, including the recorded trainings, almost 300 school-tested standardized recipes and a menu planning tool. This [culinary webpage](#) is proving to be a valuable resource for building confident school kitchen teams and elevating local school meal programs.

Food-Based Learning:

Food-based learning further enhances farm to school activities by connecting classroom lessons to the meals served in school cafeterias. Georgia State School Superintendent Richard Woods created the first state agency position in 2017 for an Academic Nutritionist, to make these important classroom connections and further student learning opportunities. Using school meals and the cafeteria as part of academic lessons further expands and enforces the value of school meals as part of student education. Students who grow, taste, and prepare foods as part of classroom lessons are more likely to consume those foods.

Locally Sourced Foods in Georgia:

[\\$5.6 million of locally grown produce was incorporated from the USDA Department of Defense Fresh Entitlement program](#). In addition, Georgia received \$7.1 million in Local Foods for Schools federal funding that allowed for the expansion of local procurement and distribution, which resulted in an additional \$4.9 million of locally sourced and minimally processed foods purchased to date. These are two examples of how fresh, local food is on Georgia school menus.

Conclusion:

We have an historic opportunity to leverage the power and reach of school nutrition programs to combat the chronic health crisis plaguing our nation. These programs provide a unique opportunity to not only improve the wellbeing of children but also instill healthy eating habits that can last a lifetime.

First, let me express heartfelt gratitude on behalf of our nation's school-aged children and school nutrition professionals for the steadfast financial support provided over the past 80 years to fund school meals. This commitment has enabled significant advancements, such as expanding farm-to-school initiatives, upgrading kitchen equipment, and increasing local food purchases.

As we work together to seize this moment, I urge you to consider further expanding the investment in school nutrition programs. Increased funding would address the challenges posed by labor and food costs, ensuring that school nutrition professionals are equipped to prepare the highest-quality meals for our children. Additionally, streamlining regulatory requirements and reducing administrative burdens would allow the focus to remain on the essential mission: providing children with nutritious and high-quality meals.

The returns on this investment will be profound, touching the lives of millions and shaping the health and vitality of future generations.

Additional resources:

[GaDOE School Nutrition webpage](#)

[FRAC research](#)

[SNA 2023 Trends report](#)

Dan Gorman
Food Service Director, Montague Area Public Schools
In Support of School Meals
Before the
Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
April 1, 2025

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here. I am eager to provide insight into school food service operations in our country and what support we need from Congress to offer high-quality, nutritious meals, including milk, to students so they can be successful in school and in life.

I am the Food Service Director for Montague Area Public Schools in Michigan and have been involved with school meals for over twenty years.

Today, I want to talk about the importance of this dollar.] This dollar allocated by Congress for the school meals program is, in my opinion, the best dollar the U.S. government spends. We have been given the mission of feeding America's children. We do that every day; close to 30 million lunches and 15 million breakfasts—served by kind, caring, and highly trained nutrition professionals who provide well-balanced, healthy meals.

The Healthiest Source of Food

Research shows school meals are the healthiest source of food for children, and I see first-hand how they are a key ingredient to the success of the school day. When kids are hungry, they do not have the focus or energy they need for their class work and can often get distracted or become disruptive to an entire class. We need all students in our schools to be well-fed and ready to get the most out of their day.

School meals also support families, many of whom are struggling to cover the cost of groceries, with rising food prices and the current economic uncertainty. When children eat school breakfast and lunch, it frees up money in household food budgets to provide more food or healthier food at home.

A Dollar That Does So Much More

But this dollar does so much more for our communities and country. The approximately 45 million school meals served every day include fruits and vegetables grown by American farmers, meat from American ranchers and producers and milk from American dairies. The School Meals Programs also provide funding to food manufacturers who develop healthier products, food distributors who keep our supply chains moving, and provide meaningful work to school cafeteria staff across the nation. Most importantly, school meals serve as a financial and nutritional safety net for millions of kids.

One of the Smartest Programs

The Community Eligibility Provision (commonly referred to as CEP) allows high-need schools to offer breakfast and lunch at no charge to all students. Instead of processing applications for every potentially eligible student, we rely on highly accurate data from programs like SNAP and Medicaid. Children receiving those benefits are automatically enrolled for free or reduced-price school meals, which is much easier for my staff and the families we serve. In addition, some of our most vulnerable children, such as those who are homeless or in foster care are automatically eligible for free school meals. If 25 percent of a school's enrollment is automatically eligible for free school meals, the school can participate in CEP. This percentage is called a school's "Identified Student Percentage" or "ISP" and is only a portion of the students who qualify for free or reduced-price school meals if families were asked to fill out a school meal application.

CEP is one of the smartest programs in government and I've seen a real difference in school meal operations while using it in my own district over the past five years. By streamlining program administration, CEP allows my team and me to focus on what we love to do: preparing and serving high-quality meals for students. I'm no longer chasing down individual school meal applications to figure out whether Johnny or Susie qualifies for a free, reduced-price, or paid meal. I'm focused on feeding kids nutritious meals. I oversee nutrition operations for two school districts: Montague and North Muskegon. Montague school district, with an enrollment of 1,400

students, has an Identified Student Percentage of 40 percent. North Muskegon school district includes 900, 25 percent of whom are identified students. CEP has been a great success in both districts. Montague has been a great success in increased participation since 2020. In North Muskegon we were able to qualify for CEP in 2023 as saw a 300% increase in breakfast participation and a 30% increase in lunch participation. This allows more children to experience the educational and health benefits linked to participating in school meals and has streamlined operations so that my staff and I have been able to focus on meal quality. We have formed a regional purchasing collaborative which has doubled local produce purchases in our schools. It has also allowed us to create student led culinary projects where students create menu items using local Michigan produce for healthy delicious choices, as well as pursue a county-wide school garden initiative and a regional processing kitchen to get more farm fresh produce into schools. Teachers and administrators love the program, reporting improvements in behavior and improved concentration in the classroom. And families love CEP as well – saying it has supported household finances and introduced children to new, healthy foods.

While both districts are eligible to participate in CEP, the federal reimbursement we receive to operate the program is inadequate to cover the cost of offering all students free school meals. In CEP schools, federal reimbursement is directly tied to the school's Identified Student Percentage. The higher the ISP, the more federal reimbursement a CEP school receives. The lower the ISP, the less federal reimbursement a CEP school receives. At 25 and 40 percent ISP, federal reimbursements are insufficient to cover the cost of meals served at North Muskegon and Montague. We use community eligibility anyway because of the many benefits that offering free meals to all our students brings to our school, staff and community.

The proposal currently floating around Congress to increase the CEP threshold from 25 percent ISP to 60 percent ISP would be damaging for the school districts I oversee and to schools in every single state. If passed, both Montague and North Muskegon would lose CEP, joining more than 24,000 other high-need schools, serving more than 12 million children, who

would lose access to free school meals through CEP. Losing CEP would be detrimental to children, families, and schools, resulting in burdensome paperwork, increased school meal debt, and a return of hunger in our classrooms.

Determining school meal eligibility in non-CEP schools is cumbersome and inefficient. First, families must complete complicated applications just to receive school meal benefits. The process can be confusing, especially for families working multiple jobs to make ends meet. Applications are submitted to school secretaries, who do an initial review for completeness. Then applications are sent to school nutrition staff who must ensure that every field is completed, the application is signed, and the income information is accurate. Once approved, I need to review the application, again checking for accuracy and completeness. And this entire process must be completed within 10 days!

Every year, we hire an auditor to assist with the application process. Every three years, the Michigan Department of Education reviews our process and work. At some point, USDA staff will also need to audit the application. All these people look at the same paperwork — all to confirm that Johnny is deserving of a free meal.

In my district, this process involves reviewing around 200–250 applications annually. If the House Budget Chair's proposal to increase household income verification paperwork goes through, I would go from reviewing 200–250 applications to 750 applications, a three-fold increase in paperwork! For larger school districts, they would need to individually verify tens of thousands of school meal applications. School meal programs simply aren't structured to handle paperwork like that. We don't have the staff time allocated for it or the funding to cover the work hours required. And the cost would come out of the school meal reimbursements, damaging the quality of the meals that we are able to serve.

Our schools are lucky to be in Michigan, a state that has passed a Healthy School Meals for All policy where the state picks up the tab between federal reimbursements and the cost of

offering meals at no charge to all students. But for states without a Healthy School Meals for All policy, which is most of them, weakening CEP and increasing school meal application paperwork requirements will mean school food service professionals will spend untold hours pursuing applications that have not been returned or are incomplete and the problem of unpaid school meal debt will come back full force. Also, if families are deterred by the additional paperwork requirements and participation in school meals decreases, it will result in fewer future USDA foods commodity dollars, which in turn shrinks the market for our American farmers.

We are also concerned about proposed changes in cuts to SNAP and Medicaid eligibility. Currently 1 in 5 children receive SNAP benefits and 2 in 5 children are covered by Medicaid. These programs also currently allow for an important school meals simplification – direct certification the free and reduced-price meal eligibility in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) for free or reduced-price school meals. If families lose eligibility in either SNAP or Medicaid, it increases the likelihood that students will face additional difficulties in qualifying for the lunch and breakfast programs. Children are more likely to miss out on the free or reduced-price meals they are eligible for. Plus, fewer schools would qualify for community eligibility.

Support for Local Food Systems

Another critical piece of this conversation is the funding that has been pulled back from essential programs like the Local Foods for Schools (LFS), the Local Food Purchasing Agreement (LFPA), and the Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant. These programs matter.

We live in a world where I can push a button and have food from across the globe delivered to my door. That's a wonderful system—until it fails, like it did during the pandemic. When that system broke down, we realized how vulnerable we are. We need a local food system. While we've long subsidized big agriculture—and that's important—we also need to invest in small agriculture. This isn't just about supporting small farmers because it feels good. It's a national security issue. A resilient and strong country needs small agriculture to be as

strong as big agriculture. Programs like LFS, LFPA, and the Farm to School Grant build that resilience and must continue to be supported.

Non-Congregant Summer Meals for Rural Area

I am extremely grateful for the non-congregant summer feeding option available in our areas.

The USDA's Non-Congregate Summer Meal Service is designed to provide nutritious meals to children in rural areas where traditional, group-based (congregate) meal services are unavailable. This initiative allows my schools to distribute meals that children can consume off-site, addressing challenges such as transportation barriers and limited access to meal sites.

In designated rural areas where over 50% of the population qualifies for free or reduced-price meals, we have established sites to combat summer hunger. For years, reaching these children during the summer months was a challenge. The introduction of non-congregate summer meals has been transformative, enabling us to provide 7-day meal packs—including breakfasts and lunches—filled with Michigan's seasonal produce like strawberries, blueberries, asparagus, and corn on the cob. This approach not only nourishes families but does so with dignity, offering support in a manner that encourages participation without the social stigma sometimes associated with food pantries.

The Non-Congregate Summer Meal Service is essential in combating food insecurity for children in rural areas during the summer, ensuring they remain nourished and healthy when school is out. However, access to summer meals is not just a rural issue. Families in urban and suburban communities also face challenges in reaching congregate meal sites, leaving many children at risk of hunger each summer. Expanding this program to include all schools would be a significant step toward eliminating food insecurity and ensuring that all children have consistent access to nutritious meals year-round.

A Tradition of Getting Things Done

This committee has a long history—much like American agriculture—of bringing people

together to solve problems and help others. While many things may work differently in these halls, this committee has always been a group that works for America. I hope that work continues.

I'm incredibly grateful to be here and share this message. I would be happy to help in any way possible because this is the best dollar our government spends.

As this hearing is about the Whole Milk issue, please note that flexibility rather than mandates would allow us to serve our customers based on their preferences but what worries me more are the proposals that will reduce the Community Eligibility Program (CEP) and divert resources away from meals.

My team strives very hard to meet our customers' expectations and serve healthy, local food, keeping dollars in our communities, and we need your support to keep this work going. We need to be successful in nutrition because our students can't be successful without it. My school district works hard to make the dollars you give us for school meals stretch to the max, working hard for students and our schools. I am ready to share our expertise and our experiences with you, and I welcome your questions.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

APRIL 1, 2025

Agriculture Committee
*Legislative Hearing to Review S. 222, the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act, and Improving
 Children's Health*
 April 1, 2025
 Questions for the Record
Dr. Eve Stoody

Senator John Boozman

1. In December, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service published a Request for Information to collect public input about how high-protein yogurt—including Greek Yogurt—may increase access to high-quality, affordable, nutrient-dense foods through our Child Nutrition programs. Do you believe that high-protein yogurt could play a meaningful role in improving the nutritional quality of foods served in child nutrition programs, including school meals?

Response: The Dietary Guidelines recommend dairy as an important part of a healthy dietary pattern. Specifically, healthy dietary patterns feature dairy, including fat-free and low-fat (1%) milk, yogurt, and cheese to meet recommendations for calcium, vitamin D, and other nutrients. High-protein yogurt, which credits as a meat/meat alternate in Child Nutrition Programs, can play a meaningful role in improving the nutritional quality of program meals and snacks as a source of protein, calcium, zinc, potassium, and probiotics. The comment period for USDA's Request for Information on grain-based desserts and crediting of high-protein yogurt in the Child Nutrition Programs closed on March 26, 2025. USDA is currently analyzing the 483 public comments received and remains committed to finding ways to ease menu planning for Program operators and ensuring that participants have access to a wide array of nutritious food and beverage choices that meet children's dietary needs and preferences.

Senator Amy Klobuchar

1. **Relationship between SNAP and the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Program:** Can you explain how a child's participation in other means-tested programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Medicaid Program can affect eligibility for or receipt of free or reduced-price meals in the School Lunch or School Breakfast Program? Similarly, can you explain how eliminating eligibility for SNAP can also reduce automatic certification for school meals?

Response: All children in households receiving benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are automatically eligible for free school meals and do not have to complete a school meal application. In the 43 states participating in USDA's Direct Certification with Medicaid Demonstration Project, children who participate in Medicaid and whose household incomes meet income eligibility requirements are

automatically eligible for free or reduced-price meals and do not have to complete a school meal application.

If fewer households were eligible for SNAP, this would reduce the number of households who are automatically determined eligible for free school meals. If a household previously eligible for SNAP becomes ineligible, children in that household would continue to receive free school meals for the rest of the school year and 30 operating days into the next school year because school meal programs confer year-long eligibility. The next school year, the household would be required to submit a school meal application to certify their child's eligibility for school meals based on their income or participation in another means tested program, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Senator John Hoeven

1. Has USDA considered the effects of the restrictions on the operations of dairy producers, as well as the rural communities in which many of these farms are located?

Response: Dairy producers have been driving change and identifying innovative and cost-effective strategies to provide a range of dairy options that optimize milk composition, feed management, and animal health. USDA strongly supports the dairy industry, and in Fiscal Year 2023 invested \$2.4 billion in healthy dairy products served to children and families through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and school meals. USDA is well aware of the challenges facing small dairy farmers and continues to seek ways to put farmers first.

According to the 2023 Farm to School Census (Census), nearly three quarters (74 percent) of School Food Authorities (SFAs) participated in farm to school in School Year 2022-23. SFAs participating in farm to school spent \$1.8 billion on local food with nearly half going to local fluid milk—putting milk as the top item purchased locally. Beyond fluid milk, the Census also reported an increase in SFAs purchasing other dairy products locally.

The Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program (Farm to School Program) works to improve access to local foods in Child Nutrition Programs (CNP). In 2024, the USDA expanded the geographic preference option to allow CNP operators to use local as a specification for the procurement of local unprocessed agricultural products, including fluid milk. The purpose was to ease challenges related to local procurement and increase local foods in CNPs. The Farm to School Program remains committed to supporting State agencies, CNP operators, farms, including small dairy farms, and other partners in further increasing and strengthening local purchasing throughout the United States.

Agriculture Committee
 Legislative Hearing to Review S. 222, the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act, and Improving
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 April 1, 2025
 Questions for the Record
Dr. Keith Ayoob

Senator John Hoeven

1. Do you believe the current milk restrictions are contributing to decreased dairy consumption among children, and what does this mean for children meeting their daily intake needs of essential nutrients like calcium and vitamin D?

Thank you for your question, Senator Hoeven. Milk consumption declines as choices become more limited. Most of the milk purchased for the home is either regular or reduced fat ("2%") milk, yet the only milk allowed in schools is nonfat or low-fat ("1%") milk. Given that at least 60% of children and up to 90% of teens are not getting enough calcium, and that milk provides 3 of the 4 "nutrients of concern" (calcium, vitamin D, and potassium), so identified because the more than 50% of Americans do not meet daily recommended intakes of these nutrients, limiting milk choices at school is not likely to close these nutrient gaps.

Milk is offered daily as part of school lunches. If they refuse the milk offered at school because of the limited options, I'm concerned that they'll fall into the habit of skipping milk at lunch on a regular basis. Doing so means missing the opportunity for the numerous essential nutrients, in addition to calcium and vitamin D, that milk offers. Over the course of twelve years of public schooling, that can create a huge nutrient gap, and one that doesn't have to happen.

Senator Michael Bennet

1. Given the pressure schools are under to serve high-quality meals with limited budgets—often without relying on ultra-processed foods—what tools or support do you believe are most urgently needed at the federal level to help districts meet those expectations?

Thank you for this question, Senator Bennet. Funding for school meals should always be prioritized even when budgets are tight. For many students, school meals are the healthiest and most balanced meals they will consume during their day. Providing healthier food options, even those that come at a somewhat higher cost, will benefit students by providing better health outcomes that will likely lead to less costly medical interventions down the road. And if children who previously bypassed the school lunch return to the lunch table because it now has the milk option they like, although they come for the milk, they are more likely to stay for the meal, potentially increasing their intakes of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and the other nutritious attributes of balanced school meals.

Senator Adam Schiff

1. Millions of kids across the country, not just in California, cannot digest dairy milk. They literally become sick from having to choose from *just* dairy options. Many kids also simply prefer an alternative. Do you see any justification for authorizing schools to offer whole milk on the lunch line but *not* fortified soy milk, which is nutritionally equivalent to dairy milk? Why should schools offer one but not the other?

Thank you for your question, Senator Schiff. First, fortified soy is allowed because it's the closest alternative to dairy milk, but this alternative is by no means an equivalent. Dairy is unique and that's why it is a separate food group. That said, fortified soy is the only plant-based option that approaches dairy's nutrients.

Secondly, children preferring a soy alternative have always been able to get that. It's more expensive, so isn't typically stocked unless there is a request. When I've inquired about this in my past conversations with school food managers, they have indicated that, when it is offered regularly, it tends to be passed over, then has to be tossed out because the kids — even many who initially say they want soy milk, -- go back to dairy milk.

Third, lactose intolerance is real, but children with lactose intolerance have also always been able to get lactose-free dairy milk. Indeed, there is an effort now by some to make all school dairy milk lactose-free, to avert this issue altogether. As a clinician of many years, working almost exclusively with minority children, I ask about tolerance to dairy milk as part of my routine evaluation. The reports of intolerance are extremely low.

I should point out that there is a difference between lactose "malabsorption" and lactose "intolerance". While many people no longer produce the lactase enzyme that digests lactose (myself included), they are not necessarily "intolerant", that is, they do not always show symptoms. Generally, this is because the gut bacteria are often able to adapt to produce lactase. This can result, over time, in no longer even needing lactose-reduced dairy. Still, lactose-free dairy milk is available whenever needed." While lactose-free dairy milk carries a higher cost than standard dairy milk, Congress and the USDA could solve this challenge by ensuring all schools have adequate funding to offer lactose-free dairy milk to those who need it.

Agriculture Committee
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Questions for the Record
Mrs. Krista Byler

Senator John Hoeven

1. What impacts do you believe reinstating whole milk would have on school meal programs in terms of participation, food waste, and cost?

I believe offering a complete variety of milk would significantly decrease milk waste since students would have the ability to select the milk which fits their needs and wants, they would actually consume what they select.

Participation increases may be realized in some programs in which the students are paying full price for meals since they are able to get items that they want.

I can only speak for my area on the cost factor, there is about a 3-cent difference in cost per serving for our district. I feel that is a valuable investment!

2. Do you believe reinstating whole and reduced-fat milk would be beneficial to ensuring children meet daily nutrient goals?

I believe that offering a complete variety of milk greatly increases the amount of milk which will be consumed instead of wasted. Milk consumed = nutrients consumed!

Senator Michael Bennet

1. Do schools and local producers currently have enough access to training and technical assistance to support local procurement?

In Pennsylvania we do! PDE and the Farm-to-School Network do a fabulous job offering training and resources to support local procurement and production.

Senator John Fetterman

1. I support legislation to expand all options in the school lunchroom. That's why I co-lead the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act and on April 1, introduced legislation to allow lactose intolerant students more dairy-free options: The Freedom in School Cafeterias and Lunches Act. I'm intrigued by the whole milk trials your school district ran during the 2019-2020 school year.
 - a. Can you talk more about what your trials found from the standpoint of boosting milk consumption? *We found a 50% increase in consumption during our trial based on milk ordering, daily inventory and waste data.*
 - b. How could the study be replicated to consider both lactose- and dairy-free alternatives needed for lactose intolerant students? *USDA approved soy and lactose free milks are available and could be included. In our district we offer both and Original Soy and Turner's Lactose Free milk to our students.*

Thank you, Senator Fetterman for your support for the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act!

2. I also support legislation to expand the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and have introduced legislation to expand it. I know that Union City Area School District is CEP. Can you share what increasing the CEP threshold from 25% to 60 or even 65% would mean for low-income students' ability to access milk and other nutritious foods at school?

Union City Area School District has participated in the CEP programming since it's inception. I cannot say enough about the ability of CEP to allow schools to SIMPLY FEED OUR STUDENTS! There is no stigma, no fear and no one going hungry. As stated in my oral testimony, I truly believe school meals are an essential school supply and CEP allows schools to make that a reality. Lowering the threshold would enable millions of school children to fuel up for their future without stigma or fear of hunger at school.

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Questions for the Record
Dr. Linette Dodson

Senator Michael Bennet

1. What ripple effects do you foresee in schools if states are asked to shoulder more of the cost of SNAP or if SNAP eligibility is reduced?

States shouldering more of the cost of SNAP would result in an increase in the SNAP expenses that would need to be supplemented by state government if the federal funding was reduced. If the states were not able to cover the lost federal SNAP funds, then fewer families would receive SNAP benefits.

Indirectly a reduction in federal SNAP benefits would impact the direct certification of children for the National School Meal Programs. Currently, children receiving SNAP are automatically made eligible for free school meal benefits, preventing gaps from occurring for economically challenged families and their children with paying for school meals, while a meal application is processed. Many times the charges that families incur for school meals prior to meal eligibility, is a challenge for families to pay back placing financial burden on the local school district.

2. Do schools and local producers currently have enough access to training and technical assistance to support local procurement?

There is procurement training available to schools, however the complexities of the federal procurement regulations are complicated. The requirements are also especially challenging to small, rural school districts that may be limited with distributors that want to provide deliveries to them.

The producers, especially small producers, may have limited knowledge of the federal requirements and potentially may have limited understanding of the contract language required in federal procurement documents.

State agencies do provide procurement training for school districts and also routinely provide technical assistance. Limited technical assistance may be available to support local producers and smaller state agencies may be limited with the extent of resources they are able to provide to their school districts.

Senator Raphael Warnock

1. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) allows schools in very low-income communities to automatically enroll all students in free school meals if 25 percent of those students qualify for other means-tested safety net programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Despite rising costs for families, there are a number of proposals to raise the threshold for schools to qualify for CEP from 25 to 60 percent.^[1]
 - a. How does CEP allow schools to more efficiently and effectively feed kids?
 - No meal applications are required, which saves time and administrative resources for school nutrition staff associated with processing applications.
 - CEP simplifies paperwork for families and school staff which allows staff more time to focus on providing quality school meals.
 - Streamlined meal service is possible when alternate meal counting methods may be implemented with CEP which improves meal service and line speed.
 - CEP allows all students to receive school meals at no cost removing the stigma around free or reduced priced meal eligibility encouraging student participation potentially increasing meal participation.
 - Improved attendance and academic performance results when children are well fed and nourished.
 - Equity and access results in ensuring no child goes hungry due to lack of paperwork or income barriers.
 - b. How many Georgia schools use CEP?
 - For School Year 2024-2025 there are 1296 schools within 170 School Food Authorities participating in CEP. This includes traditional public schools, local charter schools, state commissioned charter schools and private schools.
 - How many Georgia schools will lose access to CEP if the threshold for eligibility is raised to 60 percent? Approximately 334 schools out of the 1296 schools participating in CEP will lose access if the threshold is increased to 60 percent and no other guidance for eligibility is changed.
 - c. How many Georgia students will lose access to free school meals if the threshold for CEP eligibility is raised to 60 percent?
 - 221,242 children will lose access to free schools meal if the CEP threshold is raised to 60 percent (based on Oct 31, 2024 Free Reduced Lunch Enrollment Data)

[1] Ways and Means Committee (2025),
https://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/budget_optionspdf.pdf.

2. Georgia farmers participate in federal nutrition programs like the Local Foods for Schools Cooperative Agreement and the Farm to School program. Reporting indicates that the U.S. Department of Agriculture has recently cut these programs.[1]
 - a. How do Georgia's school kids benefit from programs like Local Foods for Schools and the Farm to School Program?
 - Student acceptability of an increased variety of fresh foods improves with participation in Farm to School Programs. When students are involved in growing food, they are more likely to taste and try unfamiliar foods that they were involved in growing. In addition, Farm to School programs help students better understand how food is grown, the important role of our farmers and it can even provide academic applications for curriculum standards that are relatable to students. When students see foods they are familiar with because of Farm to School initiatives served in their school meals, they are more likely to consume those foods.
 - The Local Foods for Schools (LFS) Cooperative Agreement allowed local school meal programs to experiment with innovative local purchases. In Georgia, 205 local producers were purchased from, increasing the local sourcing of those menu items. An additional benefit from purchasing minimally processed foods from local producers resulted in an improvement in the taste and consumption of those school meal items prepared with locally sourced foods. More schools started cooking raw beef, chicken, pork and shrimp expanding their school menus. 43% of the purchases made with LFS funds during the first year were for protein items. The remaining funds were used for fresh produce. Including more locally sourced foods as part of school meals improved the quality of the meals served and increased student participation and school nutrition staff buy in.
 - The LFS funds allowed local producers to have consistent purchases that gave them funds to maintain and even improve their farming operations. Local school districts would commit to purchase foods, stabilizing the small producers market. Hunter Cattle Company was the top farm/producer for livestock in Georgia and he provided beef to 18 school districts as a result of LFS funding.

Aimee Picchi, *USDA Cancels \$1 Billion in Funding for Schools and Food Banks to Buy Food from Local Suppliers*, CBS News (Mar. 13, 2025),
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/usda-cancels-local-food-purchasing-food-banks-school-meals/>; *USDA Halts FY25 Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grants*, School

Nutrition Association (Mar. 25, 2025), <https://schoolnutrition.org/sna-news/usda-halts-fy25-patrick-leahy-farm-to-school-grants>.

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*Legislative Hearing to Review S. 222, the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act, and Improving
 Children's Health*
 April 1, 2025
 Questions for the Record
Mr. Dan Gorman

Senator Michael Bennet

1. Can you speak to the importance of direct certification to improve outcomes and cut red tape?

Direct certification is one of the most effective tools we have in school meal programs to ensure children get the food they need without unnecessary administrative barriers. Currently, approximately 80% of our free and reduced-price meal students are qualified through direct certification—a process that seamlessly uses existing means-tested data from programs like SNAP and Medicaid to determine eligibility. It's simple, secure, and efficient.

Without this streamlined process, we would be required to collect individual paper applications from families—a time-consuming and error-prone method. Families may not complete forms accurately, papers often get lost in backpacks, classrooms, or school offices, and small mistakes can trigger a burdensome back-and-forth with parents, delaying access to meals for students.

What's more, once these paper applications are submitted, they must be reviewed and verified by multiple entities—including the District Food Service Director, school auditors, state education officials, and USDA staff—just to ensure compliance. Each step consumes staff time and federal dollars that could be better spent nourishing students.

Direct certification cuts through all of that red tape. It allows school nutrition professionals like me to focus our time, energy, and funding on what matters most—getting healthy, high-quality meals onto students' trays. It also reduces stigma and barriers for families who might otherwise miss out on benefits due to paperwork issues.

At a time when we're being asked to do more with less, direct certification is a clear example of good governance, resource stewardship, and putting kids first. Eliminating or undermining this process would be a step backward for efficiency, equity, and child nutrition outcomes.

2. In your experience, what are the most effective mechanisms for increasing the amount of local foods in schools, especially given the limited time and capacity that many nutrition directors face?

In my experience as a Food Service Director with over two decades of work in school nutrition and local food systems, the most effective mechanisms to increase local food in

schools are those that provide real, sustained support for both ends of the supply chain: school nutrition programs and small-scale farmers.

Everyone agrees that local food in schools is a win-win. It's better for kids—fresher, more nutritious, and more connected to their community. It's better for our local economies and small farmers. And it strengthens the overall school system by building pride, purpose, and local relationships. But despite all of that, the reality is: **it's harder to get local food into schools than it is to stick with the standard supply chain.**

That's where targeted support programs like **Local Food for Schools (LFS)** come in. These incentives help school districts take the leap. They create space for food service directors—who are already stretched incredibly thin—to seek out local producers and explore new procurement strategies. Without these supports, many directors simply don't have the time or resources to make local food work.

There are also real logistical barriers. While it's relatively easy to serve local apples, many other crops—like Michigan potatoes, squash, or corn on the cob—require significant labor and equipment to prepare. Most school kitchens aren't built for scratch prep at scale, and staff don't have the time or training to process raw farm products on top of their daily duties. That's why building **regional infrastructure for aggregation and processing** is key.

In **Muskegon County, Michigan**, we've been working for over a decade to overcome these barriers. We're now building a **regional processing kitchen** that will wash, chop, and prepare local carrots, potatoes, greens, and more—sourced from multiple small farms—to be ready-to-use by schools. This shared infrastructure makes it possible for more districts to access local food without overburdening staff. It also helps farmers, allowing them to sell into institutional markets while maintaining financial stability and focusing on farming—not packaging and logistics.

To scale this success nationally, we need **dedicated funding for small and regional food system infrastructure**—just like we fund large-scale agriculture through subsidies and supports. Transportation, aggregation, cold storage, and processing aren't luxuries—they're necessities if we want to connect local farms to local schools in a meaningful, sustainable way.

Senator Raphael Warnock

1. Proposals to raise CEP's eligibility threshold may not only cause Georgia students to lose out on reliable school meals but could also add more red tape for schools and families who may be currently exempt from completing and processing paperwork for free school meals.
 - a. What will be the effect on families who lose CEP coverage?

For families whose schools currently participate in CEP, free school meals are not just a benefit—they're a **reliable part of daily life**. Parents and students have come to count on breakfast and lunch being available at no cost, with no paperwork or barriers. Changing that system by raising the CEP eligibility threshold would create **confusion, hardship, and unnecessary bureaucracy**.

If CEP coverage is lost, we're asking families—many of whom are already juggling multiple jobs and financial instability—to now complete income applications just to keep their children fed. Despite our best efforts to communicate the change, **a significant number of families won't respond in time**. That means their children show up to school assuming they will receive a meal—only to be met with questions:

“Did your parent fill out the form?”

“Do you have it with you?”

“Can you make sure to bring it tomorrow?”

Ending or limiting CEP creates **barriers to access, increases stigma**, and brings **hunger into the classroom**. And hunger for a child is **humiliating, distracting, and completely unnecessary** in a country with the resources to prevent it.

CEP works because it removes red tape and lets us focus on feeding children. It simplifies the process for families, protects kids from stigma, and gives schools the ability to serve all students with dignity. Taking that away is a step backward—and it comes at a cost no child should have to bear.

While we will always feed the child, we are required to begin **charging them for meals**—and that cost begins to accrue immediately. In just a few days, a student can rack up \$5, \$10, or \$20 in meal debt—a **debt that cannot be forgiven under USDA guidelines**. So, while families struggle to catch up with the paperwork, their child has already accumulated a bill they may not be able to pay.

What follows is a months-long process of **debt collection**, phone calls home, letters sent, and stress placed on families who were previously covered under CEP. It puts schools in the uncomfortable position of being both caregiver and collector. And most importantly, it puts **kids in the middle**—some of whom may already be facing trauma, instability, or food insecurity at home.

b. What will be the effect on schools that lose CEP eligibility?

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is one of the most **efficient and effective tools** we have in school nutrition. It uses verified data from programs like SNAP and Medicaid to determine a school's free and reduced meal rate—**no guesswork, no paperwork, no red tape**. Once that data is in, we can get to work feeding kids. That's smart government.

If CEP eligibility is reduced and schools are pushed out of the program, we're **thrown backward into a system full of inefficiencies, distractions, and avoidable barriers**.

Instead of focusing on meals, nutrition, and student well-being, we're chasing paperwork. We're relying on families to complete income applications—many of which come in incomplete, inaccurately filled out, or not at all. And while we wait for those forms, **students suffer.**

Without CEP, the process of verifying a single student's eligibility for free or reduced meals can involve **up to five different people**—from the food service director to the district auditor, state education officials, and even USDA reviewers. That's **five publicly paid professionals** reviewing paperwork to determine if one child qualifies for lunch. That is not good government. That is not good use of taxpayer dollars.

After 26 years in school nutrition, I can say with confidence: **CEP has been transformational.** For the first time in my career, I can focus solely on feeding kids—**not on whether their parent filled out a form, added money to their account, or whether a clerical error is holding up their eligibility.** My attention is on quality, care, and innovation. That's how it should be.

Taking away CEP is more than just a bureaucratic change—it's a **step backwards.** It means more wasted time, more wasted money, more kids going hungry, and more stress on schools and families. We cannot let that happen.

School meals are an **investment in America's children.** No student can succeed in the classroom if they're hungry in the cafeteria. CEP lets us focus on feeding kids—not sorting through paperwork—and it ensures we're using federal dollars **wisely and impactfully.**

2. Georgia is one of 44 states that uses Broad-based Categorical Eligibility, which allows families that qualify for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to be automatically enrolled in SNAP.^[1] As you know, children who live in SNAP households are directly certified to receive free school meals.^[2] This policy can help cut red tape for families and schools and ensure our most vulnerable children have reliable access to the food they need. However, there are proposals to eliminate this policy.^[3]
 - a. How will proposals to eliminate Broad-based Categorical Eligibility affect kids who receive free and reduced school lunch?

Broad-based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE)—is a **proven, common-sense system** for determining whether a student qualifies for free or reduced-price meals. This process ensures that kids who need meals the most are automatically enrolled, without families having to jump through bureaucratic hoops.

To propose ending this efficient approach feels like a move designed to **create barriers**—to **make it harder for students to qualify**, even when we know they're in need. And when kids don't get the meals they need, they don't just fall behind academically—they also bring that hunger into the classroom, affecting themselves and their peers. Hunger is traumatic for a child, and it's something we can prevent with the right systems in place.

Currently, about **80% of our free and reduced-price eligible students** are certified through **Broad-based Categorical Eligibility**—a process that securely uses existing means-tested data from SNAP and Medicaid. It’s a **simple, secure, and efficient process**. We get the data, we match it to our students, and we feed them. That’s smart governance.

If we lose BBCE and Broad-based Categorical Eligibility, we’re forced to revert to a **paper-based system** where every family must submit an application. That’s a massive step backward. Forms get lost, parents make small errors, students forget to turn them in—and every one of those issues becomes an administrative burden that delays or denies meals.

Even when an application is submitted, it might need to be reviewed by **four or five different people**—from food service directors to auditors, to state and federal staff—all to make sure Johnny can have lunch. That’s not a good use of USDA dollars or district time.

[1] *Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE)*, USDA Food and Nutrition Service (Oct. 2024), <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/snap-bbce-states-oct2024.pdf>.

[2] Kara Clifford Billings, *School Meals and Other Child Nutrition Programs: Background and Funding* (Dec. 18, 2023), https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R46234/R46234.12.pdf.

[3] Ways and Means Committee (2025), https://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/budget_optionspdf.pdf.

Senator John Fetterman

1. I know you serve schools in a different part of the country than my commonwealth, but I’m interested in your perspective. What would increasing the CEP threshold mean for schools’ ability to serve healthy, nutritious foods, including dairy?

The **Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)** is one of the most efficient, effective tools we have in school nutrition. It allows districts like mine to focus our energy where it belongs—on feeding kids healthy, high-quality meals—instead of chasing paperwork. CEP is smart government. It takes verified data—like SNAP and Medicaid eligibility—and translates that into a clear picture of who qualifies for free meals. No guesswork, no forms lost in backpacks, no delays. Just a straightforward, trusted process.

CEP simply lets schools serve meals without putting unnecessary burdens on families or administrators. Raising the threshold for CEP would **not reduce the number of kids who are actually in need**—it would just **make it harder for schools to identify them** and serve them efficiently.

In my districts, if the CEP threshold were raised, we’d lose CEP eligibility entirely. That would be devastating. We estimate we’d lose **20–30% of the resources** we currently use to serve students. Those resources would now have to be spent verifying meal applications,

tracking meal statuses, and dealing with compliance audits. That's time and money taken away from the lunch tray.

As a result, the **quality of food would decline**. The **fresh fruit and vegetable bars** we currently offer would be scaled back or eliminated. The **15+ varieties of fresh and canned fruits and vegetables** we serve with every meal? Reduced. Our ability to serve **local produce, local dairy, and scratch-made options** would be significantly diminished.

This ties directly into **Broad-based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE)** as well. BBCE supports the effectiveness of CEP by ensuring more students can qualify for SNAP—and in turn, be **directly certified** for school meals. It's an interconnected system that helps us work smarter, not harder, while ensuring kids are nourished and ready to learn.

The bottom line is this: **raising the CEP threshold and eliminating BBCE would be a double hit to school meal programs**. We'd spend more time and money proving kids are eligible—resources that should be going to getting better food, including dairy and fresh produce, on their trays. These programs work. They're smart, they're targeted, and they support the academic and nutritional success of our students.

2. Can you please elaborate on the success of the Summer EBT program in your community and how that program benefited retailers, farmers, and children in families that qualify?

In our community, school meals are a critical support system. During the school year, we feed approximately 1,000 students every day for both breakfast and lunch. But once summer arrives, participation in traditional summer meal programs drops sharply—we're fortunate if 200 students are reached. Despite many years of effort, the congregate meal model has significant barriers: families are often unable to get to designated sites each day, especially when walkability and transportation are limited. This challenge is not unique to our rural town—it's echoed in large cities where safe, accessible options are also limited.

Summer EBT has been a transformative solution. It bridges the summer nutrition gap by giving families direct financial support to purchase food when school meals are unavailable. This flexibility empowers families, eliminates the logistical burden of accessing daily meal sites, and upholds the dignity of choice.

The benefits go far beyond the household. In Michigan, families can pair their EBT benefits with our *Double Up Food Bucks* program, effectively doubling their purchasing power at local farmers markets and grocers for fresh, healthy produce. For example, \$100 in EBT can become \$200 worth of fruits and vegetables. This not only improves nutrition for children, but it also supports local farmers and strengthens regional food systems.

In short, **Summer EBT is a vital tool in fighting food insecurity**, especially when integrated with local initiatives. It benefits children by ensuring continued access to nutritious food, supports parents by reducing financial stress, helps retailers by increasing traffic and sales, and uplifts farmers by creating reliable, local demand.

3. Can you share how efforts to weaken CEP and potential cuts to SNAP could impact this program that provides an EBT card during the summer months?

Thank you for the question, Senator. From my perspective as a Food Service Director deeply involved in local food systems, Farm to School, and school meal operations, I can say with certainty: **both the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are foundational pillars of our nation's nutritional safety net.**

Efforts to weaken CEP or cut SNAP directly threaten the integrity and effectiveness of the Summer EBT program.

CEP ensures that all students in high-need schools have access to free meals without the stigma or administrative burden of individual applications. When students are automatically enrolled in free meals through CEP, they're also directly certified for other critical supports—**like Summer EBT**. If we weaken CEP, we risk disconnecting thousands of children from the streamlined pathway that ensures they get help when school is out.

Similarly, SNAP is the backbone of food access for many families. Reductions to SNAP don't just mean fewer groceries—they mean **less Summer EBT benefit**, since eligibility is tied directly to SNAP participation. Cuts would leave children with fewer meals during the school year and fewer resources during the summer. That's a double hit at the most vulnerable time.

Food and nutrition are not luxuries—they are **essential building blocks of child development, academic success, and long-term opportunity**. If we want our children to achieve the American Dream, they must first have the basic dignity of regular, nutritious meals. A child who is hungry cannot concentrate, cannot learn, and will struggle to reach their potential—both in school and in life.

We must protect and strengthen CEP and SNAP to ensure the Summer EBT program continues to reach the children who need it most. Doing so not only supports families—it supports a healthier, more equitable, and more prosperous future for our nation.

Senator Adam Schiff

1. School meals are a vital source of healthy foods for low-income students. I'm grateful your testimony mentioned the Local Food for Schools program because I've heard incredible stories of schools being able to improve the quality and appeal of their meals through programs like this. I was proud to lead a letter with many of my Senate colleagues on the Agriculture Committee, requesting that USDA reverse its cancellation of this program. Can you describe the impacts that removing this program has for i) students' access to nutritious

food and their ability to thrive in learning environments and ii) farmers who had new markets through this program who now no longer have those markets?

Absolutely, Senator—thank you for your leadership on this issue. As someone with years of experience directing school meal programs and working closely with local food systems and farmers, I’ve seen firsthand how transformative the **Local Food for Schools (LFS)** program has been—for students *and* for our agricultural communities.

i) For Students:

School meals are often the most consistent and nutritious food low-income children receive each day. The LFS program significantly enhanced the quality, variety, and cultural relevance of the food we could offer. With these funds, we were able to source fresh, local fruits and vegetables, dairy, and proteins directly from nearby farms. This not only improved the *nutritional value* of the meals but also the *appeal*—which meant more students actually *ate* the meals.

When students are nourished with wholesome, fresh food, they’re better able to focus, learn, and thrive. Removing this program strips away our ability to make these upgrades. Without LFS, many districts will revert to more processed options—not by choice, but by necessity—due to tighter budgets and fewer purchasing options. The result is a loss in food quality, a decline in student participation, and missed opportunities to instill lifelong healthy eating habits.

ii) For Farmers:

LFS opened up critical new markets for local and regional producers. For many small and mid-sized farmers, institutional sales—like those to schools—were previously out of reach due to limited capacity or lack of infrastructure. LFS removed some of those barriers by offering stable, predictable contracts. It allowed farmers to plan ahead, invest in equipment, and grow their operations sustainably.

Now, with the program’s cancellation, those market opportunities have abruptly disappeared. Farmers who scaled up in good faith to meet school demand are left with fewer options and greater risk. And schools, in turn, lose access to the fresh, locally grown food we want to provide our students. I was contacted by a local apple grower who was concerned about his plans to pollinate a new variety of apple that would grow smaller for a better school apple. He was concerned that with the removal of the LFS funds that we would not be able to continue purchasing from him. We assured him in this case we were still interested in his apples for our students. This represents the impact of LFS. Getting our local farmers to change their business model to better fit schools is a win for all involved.

In short, eliminating the Local Food for Schools program weakens our local economies, limits student access to high-quality nutrition, and disconnects children from their local food systems. Reinstating and strengthening this program would be a win for kids, a win for farmers, and a win for communities across America.

