



Mr. Robert M. Eadie
Chief, Policy and Program Development Branch
Child Nutrition Division, Food and Nutrition Service
United States Department of Agriculture
3101 Park Center Drive, Room 640
Alexandria, Virginia 22302-1594

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Dear Mr. Eadie:

Farm to school programs are growing rapidly, and benefit children in close to 9,000 schools in 39 states. The experience of eating farm fresh fruits and vegetables, combined with experiential hands-on learning of where food comes from, is a powerful, life-altering educational experience. The National Farm to School Network, with four national staff and eight regional lead agencies, considers school meal programs to be an integral part of a child's education. As we can see from rising obesity rates and related diseases, learning to eat well is essential to living a long and healthy life. Towards that end, the National Farm to School Network recommends the following proposals for the Child Nutrition Reauthorization:

1. **Enact Mandatory Money for Section 122: Access to Local Foods and School Gardens**

Section 122 authorized a grant program for schools to receive funds up to \$100,000 to cover start-up costs for a farm to cafeteria project. These competitive, one-time grants will allow schools to purchase adequate equipment to store and prepare fresh foods, develop vendor relationships with nearby farmers, plan seasonal menus and promotional materials, start a school garden, and develop hands-on nutrition education demonstrating the importance of nutrition and agriculture. An initial investment of \$50 million will allow schools to create sustainable farm to cafeteria projects in the long-term.

2. **Increase Reimbursement Rates for All Child Nutrition Programs**

The federal reimbursements for school meals are woefully inadequate. The \$2.57 reimbursement for a free school lunch falls far short of the actual cost of the meal. Rising food and labor costs are an additional strain on school food budgets. Additional funds are needed to cover the rising costs of food and other inputs and to provide students with healthy meals. Reimbursement rates should be increased for the Summer Food, After Snack and Child and Adult Care Feeding Programs, and the meal reimbursement rate should be adjusted on a semiannual basis so as to better reflect food costs.

3. **Strengthen Standards for School Meal Programs and Competitive Foods**

An increase in the reimbursement rates should result in higher quality school meals with the inclusion of whole grains, dairy, and fresh fruits and vegetables, locally produced when possible. However, other foods such as competitive foods and a la carte items

should also be mandated to the same standards as high quality school meals. As an educational institution, schools send a message to children with the foods that are served. A uniform standard of healthy, nutritious food should apply to the entire campus throughout the school day.

4. Encourage purchasing of local fruits and vegetables through the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. The schools selected for this program should be urged to buy from local farms and sources as feasible. Buying locally reduces transportation costs and related environmental impacts, and supports the local economy

5. Incorporate language changes in existing Child Nutrition Reauthorization feeding programs to promote increased local food purchasing. This is a very efficient, no cost approach to encouraging the use of local, fresh and wholesome foods within all and any of the feeding programs included in this legislation, specifically:

- a. Commodity Distribution Program (Section 117)
- b. Summer Food (Section 116)
- c. Nutrition Promotion (Section 101)
- d. Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (Section 119)

6. Provide mandatory and consistent funding for Team Nutrition Network to enable a consistent and coordinated nutrition education approach across child nutrition programs. Incorporate education about agriculture and a local foods approach where feasible.

The USDA Food & Nutrition Service has been supportive of farm to school efforts, recognizing the positive role they can play not only in school meal programs, but in the overall education a child experiences at school. USDA's publication, "Eat Smart – Farm Fresh", encourages child nutrition directors to incorporate a farm to school approach when attempting to increase fruit and vegetable consumption. We wholeheartedly agree.

The recent language changes in the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 go one step further by allowing a geographic preference in bid specifications. We encourage USDA to continue its support of farm to school programs in helping children learn healthy choices that will last a lifetime.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments.

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