

## TESTIMONY

### ***Child Nutrition Assistance: Looking at the Cost of Compliance for States and Schools***

Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education

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By

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Chairman Kline and Senior Democratic Member Scott, Chairman Rokita and Ranking Member Fudge and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on child nutrition, a critical issue that affects students' health, well-being and ability to learn. I am an elected official on the Blackford County School Board of Trustees in Indiana, where I have served for 22 years. I also serve on the Indiana School Boards Association's Board of Directors, and on the Board of Directors of the National School Boards Association. I care very much about child nutrition and advocate for school districts to have the flexibility needed to provide each school-age child healthy and nutritious meals.

We know that healthy students learn better. Children and youth who eat nutritious foods and are active stay healthier, perform better in school and learn behaviors that will keep them healthier throughout their lifetimes.

Yet the 2010 federal law – which aimed to “improve the critical nutrition and hunger safety net” for children – has resulted in unintended consequences that challenge school districts' ability to deliver on its promise. In my school district,

students are slipping through a one-size-fits-all “net,” either opting out or declining to eat food that lacks appeal.

Blackford County Schools is a public school corporation in east central Indiana located 45 miles south of Ft. Wayne and 90 miles northeast of Indianapolis. Blackford County is a mostly rural area, heavy in agriculture and some light industry. Our board approves a \$17.8 million dollar budget which includes personnel, debt service for buildings, capital projects, transportation, instruction, and school nutrition programs.

In Blackford County, 55 percent of our 1,750 students are eligible for free and reduced price meals. For students from low-income families, school meals may be the best – or even the only – food they eat each day. So when students who need a proper meal are not eating, I am concerned. I’d like to point out some unintended consequences and challenges experienced over the last few years by Blackford County Schools.

Perhaps the most colorful example in my district is that students have been caught bringing – and even selling – salt, pepper and sugar in school to add taste to perceived bland and tasteless cafeteria food. This “contraband” economy is just one example of many that reinforce the call for flexibility. Further,

- Since 2012, student participation in free and reduced price meals has decreased from 56 to 54 percent in my district with a rise in food waste.
- Students are avoiding cafeteria food. More students bring their lunch, and a few parents even “check out” their child from campus, taking them to a local fast-food restaurant or home for lunch.
- It is clearer now with the new restrictions which students are from low-income households and which are not, because the free and reduced price meal has no additions or extra portions, whereas students able to purchase from the *ala carte* menu can obtain more food.
- Some kids cannot drink or dislike milk. Our district tried to provide needed calcium to those students with juice, but was cited by the School Nutrition Department within our state education agency and was forced to discontinue the practice.

- “One-size-fits-all” portions may be too small for students who rely primarily on school meals or active and athletic students who need more and resist being told to “eat more broccoli” to fill the void.
- Children who do not typically eat or recognize certain foods avoid and dispose of them. In my district, whole-grain items and most of the broccoli end up in the trash.
- Some food-based in-school fundraisers have been eliminated.

The clear solution to these problems is local leadership and flexibility. When local school districts have the authority and flexibility to make adjustments honoring the spirit and intent of the law they can provide students with healthy, nutritious and appetizing meals.

NSBA’s 2014 Pulse Poll on school meal requirements corroborates the call for flexibility, with responses from nearly 650 districts in at least 36 states. Sixty percent (60%) said that local flexibility would help them provide good nutrition without harm to instruction, personnel and other school district operations.

In conclusion, improving the quality of and expanding access to school meals is vital to America’s school-age children and our nation. School districts are critical partners in the effort to assure a healthy and positive learning environment for children to achieve their full potential. The Child Nutrition Act reauthorization is an opportunity to affirm and support local leadership. Our ‘bottom line’ objective should be that each school-age child, through effective local governance, receive healthy, nutritious and appetizing meals.

I again thank you for your time and am happy to respond to any questions.