

November 15, 2021

The Honorable Patrick J. Leahy
Chairman
Senate Appropriations Committee
437 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-4502

The Honorable Richard C. Shelby
Vice Chairman
Senate Appropriations Committee
304 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-0103

The Honorable Rosa L. DeLauro
Chairman
House Appropriations Committee
2413 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-0703

The Honorable Kay Granger
Ranking Member
House Appropriations Committee
1026 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-4312

The Honorable Tammy Baldwin
Chairman
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural
Development, Food and Drug Administration, and
Related Agencies
709 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-4903

The Honorable John Hoeven
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural
Development, Food and Drug Administration, and
Related Agencies
338 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-3406

The Honorable Sanford D. Bishop
Chairman
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural
Development, Food and Drug Administration, and
Related Agencies
2407 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-1002

The Honorable Jeffrey Fortenberry
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural
Development, Food and Drug Administration, and
Related Agencies
1514 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-2701

Dear Chairs and Ranking Members:

The undersigned organizations strongly oppose school meal riders in the FY2022 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill. These riders are inconsistent with the law that requires the nutrition standards be based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and would halt progress toward healthier meals. Congress should not be legislating school meal nutrition standards, particularly through the appropriations process. Those standards should be decided by nutrition scientists and experts. As you conference, we urge you to protect children's health by striking the following riders:

- House and Senate Section 740: reduces the amount of fruit and the variety of vegetables served in school breakfast in place of potatoes.
- Senate Section 763(a): allows schools to serve more refined grains by waiving the requirement that all grains be whole-grain-rich (51 percent whole grain) through product-specific waivers.
- Senate Section 763(b): prevents schools from reducing high levels of sodium by halting efforts at the first phase of sodium reduction for schools.
- Senate Section 763(c): allows schools to serve more sugary milk through waivers that permit low-fat flavored milk.

- House Section 768 and Senate Section 764: similar to the Senate Section 773(c) rider but allows schools to serve low-fat flavored milk without waivers.

Healthy school meals improve child nutrition and wellness, reduce childhood hunger, promote healthy weight in childhood, enhance child development and school readiness, and support learning. Given that the pandemic increased the risk of food and nutrition insecurity and excess weight gain, particularly for children in BIPOC communities, Congress must ensure that all children have the nutrition they need to grow up healthy.

Schools have made tremendous progress providing kids more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains; less salt and fat; and healthier beverages and snacks. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the nutritional quality of school lunches and breakfasts has increased by 41 percent and 44 percent (measured through Healthy Eating Index scores), respectively, between school years 2009-10 and 2014-15 thanks to the updated nutrition standards under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA). Experts estimate that this progress could prevent more than two million cases of childhood obesity and save nearly \$800 million in healthcare-related costs over ten years. Another study found that for children in poverty, the risk of obesity declined substantially each year after implementation of HHFKA such that the risk of obesity would have been 47 percent higher in 2018 if the nutrition standards had not been updated. Finally, a 2021 study found that school meals that follow the nutrition standards are the single most healthy source of nutrition for children—healthier than grocery stores, restaurants, and others.

Schools currently have the flexibility to waive the meal pattern requirements this school year under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) and will need support to get back on track to meet the current requirements. Instead, these appropriations riders would make it more difficult for schools and the food industry to provide healthy meals to children and would cause more confusion and uncertainty in meeting the standards. USDA has already indicated that it plans to update the compliance timeline for the sodium-reduction targets taking into account school and industry feasibility, among addressing other pending questions and updates needed to the school foods nutrition standards.

We must ensure our schools are providing the healthiest meals to children. Weakened standards will reverse gains schools have made for children's health and improvements in meal quality and exacerbate inequities, and will make it more difficult for schools that want to do what is right for their students.

We urge you to strike these school meal riders from the conferenced bill.

Sincerely,

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
American Academy of Pediatrics
American Heart Association
Association of SNAP Nutrition Education Administrators (ASNNA)
Association of State Public Health Nutritionists
Balanced
Beyond Hunger
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Center for Wellness and Nutrition
Chef Ann Foundation
Child Welfare League of America
Community Food Advocates

Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children
Consumer Federation of America
Earthjustice
First Focus Campaign for Children
FLIPANY
Food Research & Action Center (FRAC)
FoodCorps
Healthy School Food Maryland
Healthy Schools Campaign
Illinois Public Health Institute
Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future
Jump IN for Healthy Kids
Kansas Action for Children
Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, Teachers College, Columbia University
MCCOY (Marion County Commission on Youth, Inc.)
MomsRising
National Association of County and City Health Officials
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National Education Association
National Farm to School Network
National WIC Association
Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies
Nourish California
Our Children Oregon
Public Health Institute
Real Food for Kids
Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior
Society of Behavioral Medicine
The Children's Agenda
The Food Trust
The Nourished Principles, LLC
Union of Concerned Scientists
Urban School Food Alliance