

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)  
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Recently, we had the chance to meet with school nutrition professionals from across the country to discuss the issue of childhood obesity and listen to their concerns regarding regulations governing school meal programs.

Their message was clear. A priority must be placed on simplifying child nutrition programs, easing the administrative burdens, and providing flexibility to School Food Authorities (SFAs). A great example of such flexibility occurred earlier this year when your department acted to provide permanent relief on meat and grain servings. We thank you for this action and want to continue to partner with you to address the remaining challenges.

Together, we share the goal of healthier food options and outcomes for our children. However, as the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) has been partially implemented; SFAs have experienced soaring costs, increased administrative burdens, and unintended regulatory consequences that have negatively impacted participation rates and the long-term sustainability of school nutrition programs.

According to the General Accountability Office (GAO), 1.2 million fewer kids are participating in the National School Lunch Program since these regulations have been adopted. GAO also noted that schools are still experiencing significant problems with plate waste, meal planning, and managing their budgets. We are seeing examples of this in our districts. The good news is that there are solutions that USDA could enact right now to provide much needed flexibility to our school nutrition professionals who witness the impact of these regulations every day.

USDA could help schools address the significant problems of plate waste, increased costs and reduced participation by keeping the whole grain requirement at 50 percent, suspending the "Target 2" sodium requirements, and allowing any food item permitted to be served as part of a reimbursable meal to be sold at any time as a competitive food. We ask that the USDA consider acting on each of these recommendations and provide much needed flexibility to our schools.

Lastly, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 included report language that directs USDA to establish a waiver process for school districts that cannot operate their school meal program without incurring increased costs due to the new regulations. We understand that lawyers at USDA do not believe the agency has the authority to issue these waivers, however we encourage you to work with Congress to issue these needed delays until schools can implement these new regulations without incurring additional costs.

Thank you for your consideration. We ask USDA to act to provide flexibility to our school nutrition professionals who are facing unworkable regulations. We look forward to working with USDA on this important issue.

Sincerely,