



Testimony

to the

**Senate Education Committee
Hearing on Food in Education**

submitted by

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School Food and Nutrition Programs in Pennsylvania

Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Dinniman, members of the committee, thank you for inviting the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to testify before the Senate Education Committee regarding the critical importance of food in education. My name is Vonda Ramp, and I am the State Director for Child Nutrition Programs with the Division of Food and Nutrition in the Department's Bureau of Budget and Fiscal Management.

Healthy meals are an essential component to learning and growing. Every day, more than one million children and students in Pennsylvania receive nutritious meals through Federal Child Nutrition Programs, which include the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, and Summer Food Service Program.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education is committed to ensuring that all children and students have access to healthy meals through these federal programs and initiatives. These programs offer nutritious meals to children across the continuum of age, time of day and calendar year.

On September 29, 2015, Governor Tom Wolf signed an executive order establishing the Governor's Food Security Partnership. Comprised of the secretaries of the departments of Aging, Agriculture, Community and Economic Development, Education, Health, and Human Services, the Partnership is responsible for promoting coordination, communication, and joint planning between government programs and entities in the private sector in providing nutrition and food assistance to Pennsylvanians. I have participated as an agency representative on the Partnership and am pleased to say that the department is pursuing efforts to achieve the goals in the *Blueprint for a Hunger-Free PA* – goals that were developed in close collaboration with the public, private, and philanthropic sectors.

While my testimony today focuses primarily on programs we oversee at PDE that provide access to nutritious food for children and students in the commonwealth, as the First Lady's College Hunger Roundtable recently highlighted, reliable access to healthy food is very much an issue on college campuses as well. Food insecurity can be a significant barrier in the pursuits of postsecondary attainment and is not just an issue isolated to children and adolescents.

This year, a survey by the Hope Center at Temple University found that 45 percent of student respondents from over 100 postsecondary institutions were food insecure. It's difficult to focus on your studies and schoolwork when you're hungry and anxious about where your next meal is coming from. Food insecurity can force students to drop out in order to work more hours to meet their own basic needs and the needs of their families. To address this issue, PDE has been working closely with the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS) to expand college student eligibility for the nation's most important anti-hunger program, SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). We have already expanded student eligibility for Pennsylvania's community college students and are currently working to do the same for food-insecure students at our PASSHE institutions.

It is important to note that PDE and DHS will issue a public comment in opposition to a federal proposed rule that would change SNAP eligibility rules and eliminate SNAP for over 120,000 Pennsylvania households, 22,588 of which have children under 18 years old. The rule-change would have a detrimental impact on individual families, schools that qualify for CEP, as well as other programs described in this testimony.

The stress associated with insufficient resources to obtain basic needs, such as nutrition, has a profound impact on actively growing children and adolescents who are not able to identify that their hunger can be a contributing cause to short attention spans, irritability and lack of patience. These are all aspects that can be obstacles to educating a child.

One other obstacle schools have faced delivering healthy meals to students – school meal program debt – has caused a national discussion as some schools have taken ill-advised punitive measures aimed at students themselves to resolve the issue. Known as “lunch shaming,” schools have taken steps to withhold lunches from students with insufficient funds, force students who received meals to throw them away, and told students in front of their peers that their accounts are in arrears. PDE recognizes the administrative challenge that meal program debt presents to schools. However, by taking punitive or stigmatizing action against children who want the same nutritious meal as their classmates, schools have turned an administrative challenge into an unnecessary distraction from their focus on providing a safe, supportive educational environment for their students.

In addition to the support that PDE provides to schools across the commonwealth to run their meal programs efficiently, we can also support schools to react to the problem of meal program debt constructively and creatively, ensuring students are not caught in the middle of a payment issue that should be resolved by the adults in their life, both at home and at school. If a student's family is struggling financially, the last place a child should be reminded of it – or made to feel ashamed of it – is at their school.

Beyond my testimony here today, I offer you, the members of this committee and your colleagues in the General Assembly, my expertise and support in developing policy at the state level. We can and must do better by students to effectively and empathetically address this school administrative challenge, while keeping the nutritional, academic, social and emotional needs of students at the forefront.

School Breakfast Programs in PA

The School Breakfast Program (SBP) has been serving breakfast to school children across the nation since the pilot program began in 1966. Today, more than 14 million children nationwide participate in the SBP. Statewide, participation is over 400,000 students daily. The SBP uses federal and state funding to reimburse schools for free and reduced breakfasts to eligible children. Federal reimbursement rates are established annually by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Any public school, intermediate unit, charter school, career technology center (CTC), public residential child care institution, or tax-exempt non-public school, or residential child care institution may participate in the School Breakfast Program.

Breakfast is currently available in over 90 percent of the Pennsylvania school buildings that offer school lunch. Yet, just over 50 percent of students that are receiving free or reduced lunches also receive breakfast. Pennsylvania ranks 39th in the country for the number of breakfast meals served compared to lunches. While a large majority of schools offer the breakfast program, the challenge is for schools to offer the program in a way that is more accessible to the students. Traditional serving methods where a student must go to the cafeteria to receive and eat the breakfast meal can be stigmatizing, segregating, and can deter broad range participation. Schools that find alternative ways to serve breakfast, such as breakfast in the classroom, grab and go breakfast, and second chance breakfast, can increase participation. The Governor's Food Security Partnership has set a goal that by 2020, 60 percent of students benefiting from free and reduced priced school meals will participate in school breakfast.

Students who eat breakfast at school perform better on standardized tests, have improved concentration and alertness, and show increased cognitive function. To underscore the importance of breakfast to a student's academic health and progress, PDE is reinforcing guidance to local schools and districts that school breakfast can be counted as instructional time during the school day. Increasing breakfast participation is usually most successful when implementing innovative strategies that attract students and reduce stigma.

Recognizing the need for schools to innovate around school breakfast, Governor Wolf directed PDE to create a grant program, designed to assist schools with increasing participation in the School Breakfast Program through innovative delivery models. Any school that participates in the National School Lunch Program is eligible to apply. Priority has been given to schools with at least 40 percent of students eligible for free/reduced lunch. Schools can request up to \$5,000 to implement non-traditional serving methods. These innovative, alternative serving methods are intended to connect food to students in ways that are convenient and accessible. When breakfast is integrated as part of the school day throughout the building and easily accessible, students are more likely to participate.

PDE has awarded over 360 grants totaling approximately \$1.4 million. Preliminary results from the 2018-19 school year indicate that breakfast grants did increase participation by over 3 % and the results were statistically significant. PDE is in the process of compiling best practices from some of the 2018-19 grantees. Each of the schools that experienced a successful increase in participation indicated that they accomplished it with a customized approach that was driven by the unique attributes of their school, depending on grade, schedule, and staffing. The grants were flexible to allow schools to purchase equipment to implement their individualized plans.

School Lunch Programs in PA

A strong link between child nutrition and learning in school is a well-established correlation which underscores the crucial importance of maintaining and increasing the availability of school meal programs as a contributor to improving the educational performance of our children.

Every school day the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) serves nutritious meals to nearly 30 million children nationwide. Nearly 168 million school lunches were served across Pennsylvania during the 2018-19 school year. These healthy meals enhance our children's readiness to learn.

Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level, and children in families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), children in families receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (formerly food stamps), and homeless, runaway, migrant and foster children are eligible for free lunches. Children in families whose income is between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced price lunches.

To qualify for reimbursement, all NSLP lunches must meet federal nutrition requirements. School lunches must offer foods from the five required components that include whole grain, fruit, vegetable, meat/meat alternate, and fluid milk. Serving sizes vary based on the grade level of the students. Decisions about the specific foods to serve and the methods of preparation are made by local school food authorities.

All schools that are non-profit and recognized as an educational entity by PDE are eligible to participate in the school lunch program. However, there is no federal or state requirement that schools participate in the National School Lunch Program. While not quantified by the PDE, there are numerous public and non-public schools that do not participate in the National School Lunch Program.

Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)

One key provision in federal law that PDE has promoted, in order to increase participation in meal programs in schools is the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Available to Pennsylvania starting in 2015, CEP allows Local Education Agencies (LEAs), individual schools, or a group of schools within an LEA that directly certify 40 percent or more of its students as eligible through family participation in other means-tested programs, such as SNAP or TANF benefits. Qualifying schools agree to serve *all* students free breakfasts and lunches.

These schools are eligible for four consecutive years. There may be a financial cost to schools, however, since CEP does not provide full reimbursement for school meals provided to students who would not otherwise qualify for free meals.

CEP reduces the administrative and paperwork burden on schools, and dramatically increases participation by as much as 25 percent in many schools, reduces the stigma associated with which students qualify for free or reduced price meals, facilitates creative meal service options, and *eliminates student debt related to food service*. These financial and administrative benefits can outweigh costs for meals not fully reimbursed through CEP.

CEP represents a tremendous opportunity for schools that we have been promoting since the program became available to Pennsylvania. In 2015, 656 schools across the Commonwealth took advantage of the opportunity. Today, that number is over 1000, reaching over 612, 000 students, but there are hundreds more schools that are still eligible and not yet participating. By continuing to promote participation in CEP, we have the opportunity to address both the food insecurity and the student meal debt issues that have been part of our recent policy debate.

Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)

Supporting the nutrition needs of students cannot stop with the end of the school year. Established since 1975, the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is a vital tool administered by PDE to ensure that children have access to food year-round. During the summer months, a family's food budget can escalate by hundreds of dollars, while students are not able to access free or reduced priced meals in-school. This additional burden puts a fiscal strain on households that are already stretched thin. SFSP, also known as the Summer Meals Program, provides free meals to children ages 18 and younger in low-income areas, and reimburses program operators who offer those meals.

The program provides children in low-income areas with free, nutritious meals which are both an effective tool for reducing obesity among lower income children, and which allow parents to stretch food dollars farther, when children receive meals in the summer. The meals served through the SFSP require servings of grains, proteins, fruits and vegetables, and milk. Children return to school in the fall ready to learn after eating nutritious meals during summer vacation.

In the *Blueprint for a Hunger-Free PA*, the Governor's Food Security Partnership has charged PDE with collaborating with other agencies to expand the number of SFSP sites. We do this by engaging schools to actively and effectively offer and promote summer meals, identifying additional opportunities for outreach and partnerships, hosting regional planning sessions to recruit new SFSP sites and sponsors, planning for the expansion of existing programs, and by expanding awareness about the availability of summer meals through no- or low-cost communications channels. This may include backpack mail, public service announcements, automated calls, social media, and partnering with other agencies and offices that engage with eligible children and families. We seek to coordinate our activities with libraries, Boys & Girls Clubs, camps, schools, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) agencies, senior community centers, places of worship, clinics, hospitals, housing authorities, and other community organizations to increase participation in SFSP. In the summer of 2018, 95 libraries offered meals through the SFSP. A vast array of partnerships is necessary in order for the program to

operate at as many qualifying locations is possible. Location is key to the SFSP due to the predominately rural landscape of the commonwealth, making transportation and accessibility the most common and challenging barriers to increasing participation.

In the summer of 2018, the SFSP operated at nearly 2700 sites serving nearly 4.5 million meals and snacks. The Governor's Food Security Partnership has set a goal that by 2020, the number of children receiving summer meals that also receive free and reduced price meals during the school year will increase from 20 percent to 30 percent.

Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

The CACFP was initiated in 1968 as a pilot by USDA to function similarly to the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs in child care settings, an age where cognitive development is most formative, yet vulnerable, and nutrition plays a vital role in positive cognitive development. CACFP is most commonly implemented in traditional child care settings and day care homes for infants and preschool age children, however the At Risk Meal Program, which operates under the umbrella of CACFP, is intended to provide snacks or meals in qualifying low income areas after the school day. The program can operate in a school or non-profit organization building that provides educational or enrichment activities. Students can be provided up to one meal and one snack. This program can only operate during the school year, but can operate on holidays, school closures, school breaks, etc.

The At Risk Meal Program is a quickly growing program, operating in over 300 sites that served over 6.6 million meals and snacks last year. Schools and communities see the value of ensuring children and students in lower income areas conclude their day with proper nutrition.

Promoting a Nutritional Foundation

Meals served through the federal Child Nutrition Programs must adhere to nutrition standards. Recent research shows the nutrition value of school meals improved significantly over the last several years, and those meals are significantly healthier than the overall diet of children in the U.S., including meals brought from home.

Through USDA grants, PDE has provided technical assistance training and resources to schools that encourage local food connections and promote healthier preparation methods.

Limiting Food Waste – Use of Share Tables and Food Donation in Child Nutrition Programs

Questions regarding the use of share tables and food donations are often presented to PDE as related issues. In response to these common questions, PDE issued guidance that brings together guidance from the USDA and the PA Department of Agriculture (PDA), to help inform practices in both of these areas. While it is important to comply with state and local health and food safety codes when implementing share tables, the use of such a resource – which allows students to deposit food or beverages that they are not going to consume at a common space for other students to select – can greatly reduce the food waste that a school meal program produces.

Pennsylvania Food Code does not allow food that has been sold, served, or in the possession of a consumer to be used for human consumption, except under very limited circumstances. Under a variance provided by PDA, share tables allow for unopened, commercially packaged foods, fresh whole pieces of fruit, and unopened containers of juice or milk to be served at one additional time. Proper procedures must be followed, including monitoring of the share table by a food service employee and maintenance of appropriate temperature controls.

Besides share tables, a 2011 amendment to the National School Lunch Act addressed food donation in Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Food Programs. FNS programs are encouraged to plan production to minimize leftovers. If there are many leftovers on a frequent basis, they are advised to adjust menu planning and production. When there are leftovers, they should be used within the FNS programs as permitted by program regulations, and state and local health and sanitation codes. However, when leftovers cannot be used in the FNS programs, program operators are encouraged to donate them to a non-profit organization, such as a food bank, homeless shelter, or other non-profit charitable organization. Leftover food that has not been served, has been kept under the supervision of food service professionals, and has been handled according to proper food safety practices may be donated if it cannot be used in the FNS food program.

Recent research suggests that the percentage of food waste in the school meal programs aligns with other sectors of the food industry and that plate waste did not increase with the implementation of stronger nutritional standards in 2012. Plate waste was found to be significantly lower in lunch periods that started at 12 PM or later than lunch periods that started before 11:30 AM. Additionally, short meal periods do not provide students adequate “seat time” to consume an entire meal.

Pennsylvania has a strong tradition of local control, and much of the commonwealth’s education policies are determined at a local level. This deference to local decision-making is often necessary to ensure that policy and practice reflect the unique attributes and needs of Pennsylvania’s diverse communities. What works for Philadelphia or Pittsburgh, does not necessarily work the same for Jackson Mills or Johnstown. But what all schools have in common is a student body that functions better socially and academically when their nutrition needs are met. I am pleased to be a part of the support system in our Commonwealth that helps deliver that basic need to students through Pennsylvania.

Thank you for your attention, at this time I would be pleased to respond to questions from members of the Committee.