

Statement by Byron V. Garrett
CEO, National Parent Teacher Association (PTA)
Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
Beyond Federal School Meal Programs:
Reforming Nutrition for Kids in Schools
March 31, 2009

Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Chambliss, committee members, and my fellow distinguished panelists, I am honored to have the opportunity to speak before you today on behalf of the over five million members of the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) to discuss the role of nutrition in the in the upcoming reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act. With more than 25,000 local units, PTA flourishes in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Department of Defense schools in Europe and the Pacific.

As the oldest and largest volunteer child advocacy association in the United States, PTA's legacy of influencing federal policy to protect the education, health, and overall well-being of children has made an indelible impact in the lives of millions of children and families. This legacy includes the creation of kindergarten classes, a juvenile justice system, child labor laws, and mandatory immunizations for school children.

I have been involved in education and childhood initiatives for over two decades. Prior to joining PTA, I worked as national program leader at the National 4-H Headquarters at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), spent a decade working as an education advocate in Phoenix, Arizona, and was an elementary school principal. I also served under former Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano both as policy advisor for faith and community based initiatives and as director of the governor's Division for Community and Youth Development.

With regard to the topic of today's hearing, PTA has long sought to improve child nutrition and wellness and prides itself on having been instrumental in the formation of federal policy in this area since its inception in 1897. I would like to briefly mention some of the work we have done in the pursuit of this goal over the years.

One of the fundamental purposes of the National PTA has always been to preserve children's health and protect them from harm. As early as 1899, the National Congress of Mothers advocated for a national health bureau to provide families and communities with health information. Its sustained efforts bore fruit when the Children's Bureau was established in 1912 as a part of the U.S. Public Health Service.

In 1923, PTA worked to ensure the provision of hot lunches in schools. In the 1940s and '50s, we were involved in the establishment and expansion of the school milk

programs. We also worked to ensure the passage of both the National School Lunch Act and the Child Nutrition Act.

More recently, PTA and our coalition partners fought successfully for the inclusion of language mandating the creation of local school wellness policies in the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004. These wellness policies provide parents, students, school nutrition representatives, school board members, school administrators, and the general public the opportunity to formulate local policies that are tailored to the specific needs of their communities.

I mention these past accomplishments not only to underscore PTA's commitment to the well-being of our nation's children, but also to provide a historical context for where we are today. It is critical that we address the factors contributing to the epidemic of childhood obesity and other child health issues, drawing from lessons learned in past history.

The National School Lunch Program was originally established to support military conscription during the aftermath of the Great Depression, when many young Americans were being turned down for service due to their being underweight. Just this month, Dr. Curtis Gilroy, the Pentagon's Director for Accessions Policy, testified before the House Armed Services Personnel Subcommittee that many recruitment-age youth are too overweight to qualify for military service. Furthermore, recent analysis has shown that for individuals born in the year 2000, the risk of being diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes at some point in their lifetime is estimated at 33 percent for boys and 39 percent for girls. The problem has grown to the point that a 2003 study funded and supported by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed that overweight and obesity account for approximately 9 percent of total U.S. medical spending.

While the majority of the debate surrounding the upcoming reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act centers on the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs, I would like to commend the committee for looking at these programs in the context of all available food options students have during school hours. Most will agree that it is essential to ensure that the latest regulations governing the School Lunch and Breakfast programs are grounded in research and respond to health trends. It is also imperative to consider the overall effect these regulations will truly have when our students are given the choice to buy unhealthy snacks and sodas from vending machines on school grounds. One must ask themselves, are the health education lessons being provided to students having their intended impact, when the message is consistently undermined by the foods being offered on their schools' a la carte menus?

I am aware that not all of the factors relevant to addressing child health fall under the purview of this committee. However, it is critical to approach child nutrition holistically and assess issues in the entire school foods environment. With this in mind, PTA has developed a series of recommendations for the upcoming reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act which include:

- Require policies for the provision of recess, physical education, and regulation of food marketing in schools to be included in local wellness policies.
- Require periodic assessments of the development, notification, implementation, and content of local wellness policies.
- Increase reimbursement rates for school meals.
- Increase the promotion of school meals programs and reduce the administrative barriers that limit participation.
- Require the development of best practices for the processing of USDA commodities to more closely align these products with the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- Require the USDA to update the national nutrition standards for school foods sold outside of the school meals programs in order to keep pace with emerging scientific evidence.

While PTA believes that all of these recommendations are vitally important and sound policy, I would like to focus on the last recommendation for the purpose of today's hearing. PTA is a strong supporter of the Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act, which requires the USDA to update the nutrition standards for foods sold on school grounds outside of the School Lunch and Breakfast programs. School meals must meet detailed nutrition standards set by Congress and be updated regularly by the USDA in order for a school food service program to receive federal subsidies. The meals are typically balanced and contain recommended amounts of vitamins and minerals.

In contrast, the nutrition standards for foods sold outside the meal programs have not been updated since 1979. Such foods include those sold in vending machines, cafeteria a la carte menus, and school stores. The only nutritional criteria for school foods sold outside of meals are that "foods of minimal nutritional value" (FMNV) may not be sold in the food service area during meal times. FMNV are foods that provide less than 5 percent of the Reference Daily Intake for eight specified nutrients per serving. Many low-nutrition foods are not considered FMNV despite their high content of calories, saturated fat, salt, or added sugars, and can be sold anywhere on school campuses at anytime during the school day. This outdated practice no longer stands up to the scrutiny of contemporary science, dietary patterns or health standards. The best interests of our children demand that the nutrition standards be modernized.

For more than 50 years, school meals have been regulated at the federal level. Each year, the federal government invests billions – approximately \$11.7 billion in fiscal year 2008 – in school lunches and breakfasts. Selling low-nutrition foods in schools undermines that investment. The widespread availability of sugary drinks, chips, candy, cookies and snack cakes in our schools also undermines parents' efforts to feed their children healthy, nutritious meals. Each school day, parents entrust schools to care for their children all across our nation. They should not have to worry that their children will use lunch money to buy snack cake and soda rather than a balanced meal.

It is clear that parents want healthier food options available for their children, and they want the unhealthy options to be taken out of schools. According to a national poll

by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 90 percent of parents and teachers support the conversion of school vending machine contents to healthy beverages and foods. In addition, a 2005 Wall Street Journal/Harris Interactive HealthCare poll found that 83 percent of all adult respondents think that “public schools should do more to limit children’s access to unhealthy foods like snack foods, sugary soft drinks, and fast foods.”

It is also becoming increasingly clear that the scientific evidence linking healthy eating habits to academic performance supports their view. One such study, published in the Journal of School Health, identified specific dietary factors contributing to the association between child nutrition and academic performance. In 2003, researchers led by Dr. Paul Veugelers of the University of Alberta’s School of Public Health surveyed 5,000 fifth graders in Nova Scotia, Canada. They found that students reporting higher quality diets were significantly less likely to fail a literacy assessment. Furthermore, the study found that students benefiting from increased fruit and vegetable intake and lower caloric intake of fat were appreciably more likely to pass the assessment.

All across our nation, parent and community groups are making remarkable strides in addressing this issue. Please allow me to provide a few examples to the committee:

The Connecticut State PTA worked with a consortium of groups concerned about children’s health to pass state legislation which limits the beverages that can be served to students from any source on school campus, including vending machines and school stores. In addition, the law created incentives for schools to adhere to state health standards for food sold in schools, providing extra state reimbursement for their free and reduced lunch program. Only one year into the program, 101 school districts out of the 179 that were eligible signed onto the new standards.

In 2003, the Fayette County Public School district in Lexington, Kentucky, was about to renegotiate their vending machine contract. One PTA parent, Roger Kirk, used his decades of experience in the food industry to develop a Request for Proposals (RFP) that rewards the competing companies for providing and promoting healthier beverages. The school district, which had previously been very concerned about the potential for lost profits, adopted the new policy, and the company that was awarded the contract has since placed healthier options in the machines.

At Aptos Middle School in San Francisco, California, the school principal created the Aptos Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) Student Nutrition Committee, convened by a PTA member that included parents, students, teachers and other staff. They created a proposal for eliminating junk food from being sold in their school store. To ease the transition, non-nutritious foods were eliminated gradually and replaced with healthy alternatives. Though the school’s food program was operating at a deficit the year before, it netted a \$6,000 profit for the school district’s Student Nutrition Services department after implementing the new program. As a result of the pilot’s success, the program was permanently instituted at Aptos, and it has served as a model for the school district’s efforts to improve nutrition at its other middle and high schools.

These and other efforts all across our nation have helped to stem the tide, but the burden of removing unhealthy foods and beverages from our schools can not, should not and must not rest solely at the local level. Unlike other aspects of education, school foods have been primarily regulated at the national level since the Truman Administration. Two-thirds of states have either weak or *no nutrition standards* for foods sold outside of school meals programs. Furthermore, the majority of the nation's 14,000 school districts are not equipped to develop science-based nutrition standards for schools, and only 30 percent of school districts prohibit the sale of junk foods in school vending machines nationwide. A minimum federal protective nutrition standard for food sold outside of school meals is necessary to protect the integrity of the school lunch program and the health of all children in our nation's public schools.

After all, the nutritional needs of our children remain the same whether they live in Iowa or Georgia. It is untenable to force parents to fight for healthier school foods one school at a time, reinventing the wheel while facing the same obstacles at each and every turn. Reasonable national nutrition standards would ease this burden, while still allowing for a great deal of local control over the implementation of these standards.

Once again, I would like to thank the committee and all of the other panelists for engaging in this topic, which is imperative to the future of not only our children, but our country. Make no mistake, the decisions made during this reauthorization will impact our schools, our hospitals, our economy, and, most importantly, our homes. Thank you, and I would be happy to respond to any questions that you may have.