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In Support of School Meals
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Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here. I am eager to provide insight into school food service operations in our country and what support we need from Congress to offer high-quality, nutritious meals, including milk, to students so they can be successful in school and in life.

I am the Food Service Director for Montague Area Public Schools in Michigan and have been involved with school meals for over twenty years.

Today, I want to talk about the importance of this dollar.] This dollar allocated by Congress for the school meals program is, in my opinion, the best dollar the U.S. government spends. We have been given the mission of feeding America's children. We do that every day; close to 30 million lunches and 15 million breakfasts—served by kind, caring, and highly trained nutrition professionals who provide well-balanced, healthy meals.

The Healthiest Source of Food

Research shows school meals are the healthiest source of food for children, and I see first-hand how they are a key ingredient to the success of the school day. When kids are hungry, they do not have the focus or energy they need for their class work and can often get distracted or become disruptive to an entire class. We need all students in our schools to be well-fed and ready to get the most out of their day.

School meals also support families, many of whom are struggling to cover the cost of groceries, with rising food prices and the current economic uncertainty. When children eat school breakfast and lunch, it frees up money in household food budgets to provide more food or healthier food at home.

A Dollar That Does So Much More

But this dollar does so much more for our communities and country. The approximately 45 million school meals served every day include fruits and vegetables grown by American farmers, meat from American ranchers and producers and milk from American dairies. The School Meals Programs also provide funding to food manufacturers who develop healthier products, food distributors who keep our supply chains moving, and provide meaningful work to school cafeteria staff across the nation. Most importantly, school meals serve as a financial and nutritional safety net for millions of kids.

One of the Smartest Programs

The Community Eligibility Provision (commonly referred to as CEP) allows high-need schools to offer breakfast and lunch at no charge to all students. Instead of processing applications for every potentially eligible student, we rely on highly accurate data from programs like SNAP and Medicaid. Children receiving those benefits are automatically enrolled for free or reduced-price school meals, which is much easier for my staff and the families we serve. In addition, some of our most vulnerable children, such as those who are homeless or in foster care are automatically eligible for free school meals. If 25 percent of a school's enrollment is automatically eligible for free school meals, the school can participate in CEP. This percentage is called a school's "Identified Student Percentage" or "ISP" and is only a portion of the students who qualify for free or reduced-price school meals if families were asked to fill out a school meal application.

CEP is one of the smartest programs in government and I've seen a real difference in school meal operations while using it in my own district over the past five years. By streamlining program administration, CEP allows my team and me to focus on what we love to do: preparing and serving high-quality meals for students. I'm no longer chasing down individual school meal applications to figure out whether Johnny or Susie qualifies for a free, reduced-price, or paid meal. I'm focused on feeding kids nutritious meals. I oversee nutrition operations for two school districts: Montague and North Muskegon. Montague school district, with an enrollment of 1,400

students, has an Identified Student Percentage of 40 percent. North Muskegon school district includes 900, 25 percent of whom are identified students. CEP has been a great success in both districts. Montague has been a great success in increased participation since 2020. In North Muskegon we were able to qualify for CEP in 2023 as saw a 300% increase in breakfast participation and a 30% increase in lunch participation. This allows more children to experience the educational and health benefits linked to participating in school meals and has streamlined operations so that my staff and I have been able to focus on meal quality. We have formed a regional purchasing collaborative which has doubled local produce purchases in our schools. It has also allowed us to create student led culinary projects where students create menu items using local Michigan produce for healthy delicious choices, as well as pursue a county-wide school garden initiative and a regional processing kitchen to get more farm fresh produce into schools. Teachers and administrators love the program, reporting improvements in behavior and improved concentration in the classroom. And families love CEP as well – saying it has supported household finances and introduced children to new, healthy foods.

While both districts are eligible to participate in CEP, the federal reimbursement we receive to operate the program is inadequate to cover the cost of offering all students free school meals. In CEP schools, federal reimbursement is directly tied to the school's Identified Student Percentage. The higher the ISP, the more federal reimbursement a CEP school receives. The lower the ISP, the less federal reimbursement a CEP school receives. At 25 and 40 percent ISP, federal reimbursements are insufficient to cover the cost of meals served at North Muskegon and Montague. We use community eligibility anyway because of the many benefits that offering free meals to all our students brings to our school, staff and community.

The proposal currently floating around Congress to increase the CEP threshold from 25 percent ISP to 60 percent ISP would be damaging for the school districts I oversee and to schools in every single state. If passed, both Montague and North Muskegon would lose CEP, joining more than 24,000 other high-need schools, serving more than 12 million children, who

would lose access to free school meals through CEP. Losing CEP would be detrimental to children, families, and schools, resulting in burdensome paperwork, increased school meal debt, and a return of hunger in our classrooms.

Determining school meal eligibility in non-CEP schools is cumbersome and inefficient. First, families must complete complicated applications just to receive school meal benefits. The process can be confusing, especially for families working multiple jobs to make ends meet. Applications are submitted to school secretaries, who do an initial review for completeness. Then applications are sent to school nutrition staff who must ensure that every field is completed, the application is signed, and the income information is accurate. Once approved, I need to review the application, again checking for accuracy and completeness. And this entire process must be completed within 10 days!

Every year, we hire an auditor to assist with the application process. Every three years, the Michigan Department of Education reviews our process and work. At some point, USDA staff will also need to audit the application. All these people look at the same paperwork — all to confirm that Johnny is deserving of a free meal.

In my district, this process involves reviewing around 200–250 applications annually. If the House Budget Chair's proposal to increase household income verification paperwork goes through, I would go from reviewing 200-250 applications to 750 applications, a three-fold increase in paperwork! For larger school districts, they would need to individually verify tens of thousands of school meal applications. School meal programs simply aren't structured to handle paperwork like that. We don't have the staff time allocated for it or the funding to cover the work hours required.

And the cost would come out of the school meal reimbursements, damaging the quality of the meals that we are able to serve.

Our schools are lucky to be in Michigan, a state that has passed a Healthy School Meals for All policy where the state picks up the tab between federal reimbursements and the cost of

offering meals at no charge to all students. But for states without a Healthy School Meals for All policy, which is most of them, weakening CEP and increasing school meal application paperwork requirements will mean school food service professionals will spend untold hours pursuing applications that have not been returned or are incomplete and the problem of unpaid school meal debt will come back full force. Also, if families are deterred by the additional paperwork requirements and participation in school meals decreases, it will result in fewer future USDA foods commodity dollars, which in turn shrinks the market for our American farmers.

We are also concerned about proposed changes in cuts to SNAP and Medicaid eligibility. Currently 1 in 5 children receive SNAP benefits and 2 in 5 children are covered by Medicaid. These programs also currently allow for an important school meals simplification – direct certification the free and reduced-price meal eligibility in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) for free or reduced-price school meals. If families lose eligibility in either SNAP or Medicaid, it increases the likelihood that students will face additional difficulties in qualifying for the lunch and breakfast programs. Children are more likely to miss out on the free or reduced-price meals they are eligible for. Plus, fewer schools would qualify for community eligibility.

Support for Local Food Systems

Another critical piece of this conversation is the funding that has been pulled back from essential programs like the Local Foods for Schools (LFS), the Local Food Purchasing Agreement (LFPA), and the Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant. These programs matter.

We live in a world where I can push a button and have food from across the globe delivered to my door. That's a wonderful system—until it fails, like it did during the pandemic. When that system broke down, we realized how vulnerable we are. We need a local food system. While we've long subsidized big agriculture—and that's important—we also need to invest in small agriculture. This isn't just about supporting small farmers because it feels good. It's a national security issue. A resilient and strong country needs small agriculture to be as

strong as big agriculture. Programs like LFS, LFPA, and the Farm to School Grant build that resilience and must continue to be supported.

Non-Congregant Summer Meals for Rural Area

I am extremely grateful for the non-congregant summer feeding option available in our areas.

The USDA's Non-Congregate Summer Meal Service is designed to provide nutritious meals to children in rural areas where traditional, group-based (congregate) meal services are unavailable. This initiative allows my schools to distribute meals that children can consume off-site, addressing challenges such as transportation barriers and limited access to meal sites.

In designated rural areas where over 50% of the population qualifies for free or reduced-price meals, we have established sites to combat summer hunger. For years, reaching these children during the summer months was a challenge. The introduction of non-congregate summer meals has been transformative, enabling us to provide 7-day meal packs—including breakfasts and lunches—filled with Michigan's seasonal produce like strawberries, blueberries, asparagus, and corn on the cob. This approach not only nourishes families but does so with dignity, offering support in a manner that encourages participation without the social stigma sometimes associated with food pantries.

The Non-Congregate Summer Meal Service is essential in combating food insecurity for children in rural areas during the summer, ensuring they remain nourished and healthy when school is out. However, access to summer meals is not just a rural issue. Families in urban and suburban communities also face challenges in reaching congregate meal sites, leaving many children at risk of hunger each summer. Expanding this program to include all schools would be a significant step toward eliminating food insecurity and ensuring that all children have consistent access to nutritious meals year-round.

A Tradition of Getting Things Done

This committee has a long history—much like American agriculture—of bringing people

together to solve problems and help others. While many things may work differently in these halls, this committee has always been a group that works for America. I hope that work continues.

I'm incredibly grateful to be here and share this message. I would be happy to help in any way possible because this is the best dollar our government spends.

As this hearing is about the Whole Milk issue, please note that flexibility rather than mandates would allow us to serve our customers based on their preferences but what worries me more are the proposals that will reduce the Community Eligibility Program (CEP) and divert resources away from meals.

My team strives very hard to meet our customers' expectations and serve healthy, local food, keeping dollars in our communities, and we need your support to keep this work going. We need to be successful in nutrition because our students can't be successful without it. My school district works hard to make the dollars you give us for school meals stretch to the max, working hard for students and our schools. I am ready to share our expertise and our experiences with you, and I welcome your questions.