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June 9, 2021

Committee on Education and Labor  
Civil Rights and Human Services Subcommittee  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the 3 million members of the National Education Association and the 50 million students they serve, we would like to submit these comments for the record of the June 10 hearing, “Ending Child Hunger: Priorities for Child Nutrition Reauthorization.”

NEA supports providing healthy school meals for all students, at no cost to them, as the **Universal School Meals Program Act (H.R. 3115)** would do. Currently, only students from homes with incomes below 130 percent of the poverty line are eligible for free school meals. We appreciate that President Biden’s American Families Plan would expand the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), and expand and make permanent the summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) program. But that is not enough.

Providing healthy school meals for all students, at no cost to them, would improve classroom performance; eliminate the stigma of student meal debt; relieve schools of complicated and burdensome paperwork; and relieve struggling families and school districts of a significant financial burden. School nutrition staff would no longer be charged with the heart-wrenching task of taking food away from children when parents fall behind in payments. Instead, they could focus on the job they love: preparing and serving healthy meals to our students.

In addition to the steps described above, NEA believes these principles should guide Child Nutrition Reauthorization:

- **Maintain healthy guidelines for school meals.** The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act helps improve student health by upholding science-based nutrition standards for school meals programs. Students who participate in these programs consume breakfasts and lunches of higher nutritional quality, and are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables than non-participating students.
- **Train and support school food service professionals.** Reauthorization should include ongoing professional development and training for school food service staff, provided at

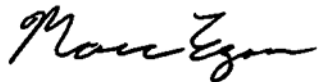
no cost to the employee. Such training should be conducted during regular, paid working hours and maximize hands-on training—improvements included in the bipartisan **Improving Training for School Food Service Workers Act (H.R. 2897)** supported by NEA.

- **Provide adequate equipment and infrastructure.** To prepare and serve healthy meals in a cost-effective, efficient manner, many schools need to update their kitchen equipment and facilities. Reauthorization should expand grants and low- and no-interest loans for modernization, as well as technical assistance to school districts.
- **Increase access to out-of-school-time programs.** After-school and summer nutrition programs, which serve primarily low-income children, combine meals with educational and enrichment activities. NEA supports broadening eligibility for these programs, as the bipartisan **Summer Meals Act (H.R. 783)** would do, and expanding the Pandemic EBT program, as the **Stop Child Hunger Act (H.R. 3519)** would do.
- **Reduce school meals debt and eliminate stigma.** The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) should promulgate standards that include directing communications to parents and guardians so children are not stigmatized by school meals debt.
- **Expand and strengthen USDA's Farm to School Grant Program.** Doing so would encourage schools to procure foods locally and support activities such as school gardens and hands-on learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought into sharp focus the depth of food insecurity in the United States. We saw it in the food lines that snaked down blocks and around corners, and are deeply grateful for the benefit programs Congress created and expanded in response. Still, it is not acceptable for any child in America—the wealthiest nation in the world—to go hungry or without nutritious meals. The best way to ensure that doesn't happen is to provide healthy school meals for all our students, at no cost to them.

We thank you for this opportunity to share our priorities for Child Nutrition Reauthorization and stand ready to work with you to make them realities.

Sincerely,



Marc Egan  
Director of Government Relations  
National Education Association