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Dennis Van Roekel
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June 9, 2014

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the 3 million members of the National Education Association (NEA), and the students they serve, we urge you to OPPOSE provisions in the FY 2015 Agriculture Appropriations bill that would undermine or delay new nutrition standards for school meals adopted under the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act and SUPPORT any efforts that would restore these vital standards. Nearly 500,000 of our members are Education Support Professionals (ESPs), many of whom are food service professionals who prepare school meals, maintain a safe and healthy learning environment, and help students learn about and practice healthy nutrition and eating habits. We offer these comments from the perspective of representing the entire range of education professionals who contribute to student wellness. Votes associated with this bill may be included in the NEA Legislative Report Card for the 113th Congress.

The nutrition standards set out in the bipartisan Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act have had widespread, positive impacts on children's access to healthy foods during the school day. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports that over 90 percent of schools are successfully meeting the updated nutrition standards. The result being a healthier school environment with more nutritious food options for students.

NEA believes that proper nutrition is essential to child development and student success. The clear link between good nutrition and learning is evident in schools across the nation every day. According to the Nutrition Cognition Initiative at Tufts University, continuous low nutritional intake affects factors such as motivation and attentiveness, which can have a negative impact on learning.

Childhood obesity has been a growing problem for decades. We now face a national childhood obesity crisis, with nearly one in every three of America's children being overweight or obese. Obesity can lead to severe and chronic health problems during childhood, adolescence and adulthood, including heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and asthma. And, the associated health risks impose great costs on families, our health care system, and our economy. Especially concerning is the fact that the obesity epidemic is disproportionately higher among children living in low-income families, according to data from the National Survey of Children's Health. Among adolescents, the total excess cost related to the current prevalence of obesity is estimated to be \$254 billion – \$208 billion in lost productivity and \$46 billion in direct medical costs (American Heart Association, 2013).

In addition to fighting obesity, school meals play a critical role in fighting hunger. Sixteen million children, or 1 in 5, live in households that struggle to put food on the table (USDA,

2012). For these students, sometimes the only sufficient meals they may get are at school. We owe it to them to make sure that school meals are as nutritious as possible.

Food service professionals, like NEA member Roselyn Green, a cafeteria bookkeeper at Lester Elementary School in Florence, South Carolina, work every day to help meet the goal of providing nutritious meals to students. According to Roselyn, her school is serving more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains in every meal and fewer foods high in sodium and saturated fats, thanks to the new standards. These food service professionals have also been instrumental in helping their students make healthier food choices as well.

NEA strongly supports the school meal nutrition standards in the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. These common-sense requirements are essential to ensuring all children a healthy and successful start in life, particularly those whose families cannot afford to provide fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy foods at home on a regular basis. The benefits and cost-savings to our children and our nation in the long-run will be significant.

We urge you to OPPOSE provisions in the FY 2015 Agriculture Appropriations bill that would undermine these important nutrition standards and SUPPORT any efforts that would restore them.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dennis Van Roekel".

Dennis Van Roekel
President