



MISSION: READINESS

MILITARY LEADERS FOR KIDS

June 11, 2014

Members of the House of Representatives:

On behalf of the more than 450 retired admirals and generals of MISSION: READINESS, I write in support of efforts to improve the nutritional quality of foods served in schools. **As you consider the FY 2015 Agriculture Appropriations bill on the House floor, we respectfully urge you to:**

- **Support the continued implementation of science-based school meal standards and refrain from any weakening or delay of such guidelines; and**
- **Support the \$25 million included for School Meal Equipment Grants.**

MISSION: READINESS is the national security organization of retired admirals and generals who have mobilized in response to Department of Defense data indicating that 75 percent of all young Americans between the ages of 17 and 24 are unable to join the military because they are medically or physically unfit, are too poorly educated, or have disqualifying criminal records. A shrinking pool of eligible Americans is a threat to our national security.

Obesity is of particular concern to the military. Excess body fat has become the leading medical disqualifier for military service. Today, more than one in five Americans between the ages of 17 and 24 are too heavy to enlist. As a result, hundreds of potential recruits fail the physical entrance exam every month because they are too overweight. In fact, between 2006 and 2011, the U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command reported that over 62,000 individuals were turned away because of their weight.

Failure to meet weight-height requirements is not just a problem among potential recruits. The data show that excess weight impacts those who have already enlisted as well. Every year, the military discharges over 1,200 first-term enlistees before their contracts are up due to weight problems; the military must then recruit and train their replacements at a cost of \$75,000 per person, totaling roughly \$90 million annually. This pales in comparison to the estimated \$1.1 billion per year that the Department of Defense spends on medical care associated with excess fat and obesity through TRICARE.

American youth spend more time in school than anywhere else outside of their homes. Children consume up to half of their daily calories during school hours, and the childhood years lay the foundation for lifelong eating habits – for better or for worse. As such, the food they receive at school plays a critical role in supporting their long-term health.

Thanks to newly updated U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) nutrition standards, requirements for school meals have been updated to align with current nutrition science. Schools are now serving more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat or no-fat dairy options while offering fewer empty calories and high-fat options.

Evidence-Based Nutrition Standards

Overall, schools across the country have done a commendable job in moving forward with the implementation of updated school meal standards. Implementation is never an easy process, and there have certainly been challenges, but by and large, schools are on the right track. Recent data shows that more than 90 percent of schools are currently in compliance with science-based standards. Reports also indicate that fruit and vegetable consumption have increased. Schools are capable of serving healthier foods and the vast majority are already doing so. We are at an important juncture. Rather than retreating from science-based standards, we need to continue to advance.

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In addition to the progress made on school meals, we are also pleased with updated snack food standards, which closely adhere to recommendations made by the Institute of Medicine. Schools have made great headway in serving healthier food, but to finish the job it is critically important that we move forward in addressing the other half of the school food environment—foods sold in vending machines, snack bars and a la carte lines. Because healthier schools meals are compromised by the over 400 billion calories from junk food being sold in schools each year, revised standards for competitive foods are essential supporting good nutrition habits. Moreover, data shows that improving snack food standards can actually help increase revenues by driving up participation in the school lunch and breakfast programs.

Given the national security implications of child obesity, we respectfully urge Congress to refrain from pursuing any action that would weaken or delay the implementation of science-based school nutrition standards. Instead, Congress should defer to USDA to provide any needed flexibility for schools, such as the recently announced flexibility for whole grains.

School Cafeteria Equipment Assistance

Many school kitchens are struggling against outdated facilities to efficiently prepare healthy meals for their students. Although more than 90 percent of schools across the nation are successfully meeting science-based standards, many report that they are forced to make-do with costly and inefficient workarounds. Designed primarily to reheat and hold food, many kitchens need new equipment capable of preparing healthier options. **As such, we strongly support additional resources for School Meal Equipment Grants. We were pleased to see \$25 million included for these grants in the Committee-passed FY15 Agriculture Appropriations bill and urge continued support for this important funding stream.**

Thank you for your attention to these important issues. Together, we can make sure that America's child obesity crisis does not become a national security crisis.

Very respectfully,

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