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May 20, 2014

Address

Dear Member of Congress:

On behalf of the American Heart Association/American Stroke Association and its more than 22 million volunteers, I am writing to express our strong support for the school food nutrition standards set forth by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. We vigorously opposed any attempt to eliminate or roll back policies such as the whole grain and sodium standards, fruits and vegetable servings, and Smart Snacks implementation. Delaying or even abolishing these standards puts our children's health in jeopardy and sets them on an early path to heart disease, stroke, disability, and early death.

The statistics are alarming and grave. Today, one in three American kids and teenagers are overweight or obese. Children between 8 and 18 are also eating more than double their recommended daily amount of sodium, leading to more young people developing high blood pressure – once viewed as an adult illness. Clinical-based research also indicates that as these children grow older, they have a much greater risk of developing and dying in adulthood from chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease.

But through programs to provide nutritious, healthy school foods, we are making real progress in protecting our children's health – today and tomorrow. Nearly 90 percent of schools are now meeting the updated nutrition standards for the school lunch program. This means that an overwhelming majority of children are receiving heart-healthy school lunch options. Indeed, healthy eating is becoming the new norm.

According to a 2014 Harvard study, kids are eating more fruits and vegetables in schools now more than ever before because of the new lunch standards. A recent Government Accountability Office report also found that school meals are healthier than ever. Most students interviewed by GAO said they like to eat healthy foods and their school meals are healthy. And parents like the new school lunch nutrition standards too because they do not undermine their efforts at home to give their children the healthy foods they need. This is critical.

Children establish lifelong habits at an early age. Forming healthy nutrition habits when young can lead to better long-term health, which, in turn, is highly correlated with increased academic success in elementary and high school years. The school food environment is crucial to setting a positive example for children as they shape these habits. Through it, we are literally helping to set the table for healthy lives free of cardiovascular disease and stroke.

As with any significant program change, some schools have experienced start-up problems, but they have been largely overcome. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has been listening, providing robust assistance to help schools overcome these challenges, and has shown flexibility by lifting the whole grains and protein portion limits for school lunches.

Together, we can make this program work to the benefit of all of our children and our nation's health care system.

We should not turn our backs on our children's health. We should not turn our backs on the very real progress we have made through the school lunch program. We should not turn back the clock to the days when Congress designated pizza as a vegetable. Science and nutrition should drive school lunch standards – not politics.

The American Heart Association strongly believes that any policy changes to the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act should be made through the regulatory process, which is meant to take the politics out of decision-making that should be scientifically-based. Such changes could also take place during next year's reauthorization of the child nutrition program when all valid issues or concerns raised can be addressed in a thoughtful and deliberate manner. We are not alone in believing that this is the best approach. More than 200 national, state and local organizations signed a statement urging Congress to oppose efforts to intervene in science-based rules regarding the federal child nutrition program. The statement can be found here:

[http://www.apha.org/SignersChildNutritionStatement\\_05\\_19\\_14.pdf](http://www.apha.org/SignersChildNutritionStatement_05_19_14.pdf)

The American Heart Association asks you to vigorously oppose any efforts to stop or roll back school food policies set by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids – including the whole grain and sodium standards, fruits and vegetable servings, and Smart Snacks implementation. The stakes are too high to do anything less – the very health of our nation's children depends on it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Nancy A. Brown".

Nancy Brown  
Chief Executive Officer