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Congress of the United States
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August 9, 2011

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Suite 200-A
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We strongly support the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) efforts to enhance and maximize the national investment in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs.

School meals provide an essential safety net, helping to address both child hunger and obesity, and providing balanced meals to 31 million children each day. Since the Truman Administration, the school meal programs have been funded and operated as national programs, with USDA setting out detailed criteria for the meals to ensure that our federal dollars are well spent and the meals provide good nutrition to children. The current national investment in school lunch and breakfast is about $12 billion a year.

However, we all know that while school meal quality has been steadily improving over the last decade, there is still much work to do. Many schools still are not serving enough fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and are serving too much sodium, and unhealthy saturated and trans fats. This work to improve school meals is especially urgent given the high prevalence and enormous cost of obesity - $150 billion a year, half of which is paid through Medicaid and Medicare.

Your proposed rule to update the school meal patterns and nutrition standards is solidly grounded in science, wisely based on the consensus recommendations in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. The proposed standards have been shown to be achievable by the thousand schools that are already meeting similar standards through USDA's HealthierUS Schools Challenge. However, we are anxious for such success to reach all schools. While school meal quality has been improving over the last decade, your rule will be helpful for a majority of schools that are still working to meet stronger nutritional standards.

We strongly support your efforts to provide model menus, recipes, training, and technical assistance to help schools implement the meal standards by the start of the 2012 school year and to regularly review schools to assess and support compliance with the standards.

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We understand USDA is reviewing the comments submitted in response to the proposed rule and will consider options to address concerns expressed in the comments. We urge the USDA to do so without delay and implement the school meal proposed rule within the proposed time frame. Timely implementation is essential to help protect child health, support school food service staff to implement the recommended changes, and get the most out of the national investment in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs.

Sincerely,

George Miller
Member of Congress

Jared Polis
Member of Congress

Keith Ellison
Member of Congress

Charles Rangel
Member of Congress

Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

Lois Capps
Member of Congress

Jesse Jackson Jr.
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Gwen Moore
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