

Statement for the Record  
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“Growing a Healthy Next Generation: Examining Federal Child Nutrition Programs”

By

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Chairperson Bonamici, Ranking Member Comer, committee members, and my fellow distinguished panelists: I am honored to have the opportunity to speak before you today.

My name is Donna Martin and I am the Director of the School Nutrition Program for Burke County Public Schools in Georgia. I am also the immediate past president of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the world’s largest organization of food and nutrition professionals. The Academy represents more than 104,000 registered dietitian nutritionists, nutrition and dietetics technicians, and advanced-degree nutritionists, and is committed to strong nutrition standards for school meal programs.

I have worked in the education setting for many years now. We give our students books, we provide them with transportation, and yet we don’t guarantee that every child has a healthy, well-balanced school meal regardless of their ability to pay. Why is that?

If we want children to succeed, we need them to learn. And in order for them to learn they need to be well fed. As a school nutrition director, my job is to ensure that every child is well nourished and ready to learn.

I work in a small, rural district in Georgia, and I believe that much of our success lies in the fact that I, and others on my staff, have the nutrition and business expertise to operate a sound school nutrition program.

I first entered the school nutrition field nearly 25 years ago, after becoming a registered dietitian nutritionist and working in pediatrics. Today’s school nutrition programs are not simply serving meals and counting money. We are conducting nutrition education with students, faculty and parents, planning menus that meet federal nutrition guidelines, working with computer systems to master point of sale programs, completing production records, training and supervising staff, managing a 4-million-dollar budget, writing specifications for equipment, and placing bids for food.

School nutrition programs are essentially like running a restaurant, a PR agency, and a nutrition education campaign, all while operating under a tight budget with minimal time and resources.

Being a school foodservice director today is a complex, demanding profession and I think it is the best job on earth!

I will stress three important points today: First, school meal programs can have high nutrition standards and be financially solvent. Second, school nutrition professionals need access to resources to ensure there is adequate equipment and technical assistance to operate programs. And third, good nutrition for

students is critical for our nation's children to succeed and for those who will join our military to be fit for service.

Our program in Burke County, Georgia serves five schools, offering breakfast in the classroom, grab-and-go breakfast, lunch, after school snack and supper, the fresh fruit and vegetable program and the summer feeding program. Burke County schools serve nearly 4,000 meals a day with a lunch participation rate of 89 percent and a breakfast participation rate of 78 percent. We believe that prioritizing nutrition coupled with serving food that tastes good is critical to running a school nutrition program. Not only is it best for the kids, but it is what makes our program so popular.

Our district is mostly rural and has a free and reduced rate of 100 percent. We operate under the Community Eligibility Provision, which has made running my program more efficient by eliminating unnecessary administrative time, paperwork and cost.

We started moving to healthier foods in our district even before the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act standards were required and you can bet that I was nervous. But we did it gradually by introducing rolls with 25 percent whole wheat flour. If you have ever been to Georgia, you know we take our fried chicken, corn bread and grits very seriously. So, we went to work and developed a delicious baked herb chicken and featured locally grown whole grain grits that are absolutely awesome. I brought each of you a bag and I know you will agree that these grits are delicious. We even have whole grain rolls and corn bread, made from scratch – and yes, our kids love them!

I am incredibly proud of our Farm to School Program that provides farm fresh produce to our students, including delicious Georgia peaches and blueberries. The students love it and often wish they could get more than just a half cup serving. We found that when we started offering local fresh fruits and vegetables like collards, cabbage, corn on the cob, broccoli, carrots, berries, melons, peaches, our fruit and vegetable consumption rates doubled.

We also employ effective strategies to help students eat their school meals. From scheduling recess before lunch to providing choices so students can select the food they like, we manage to keep our food waste low. We would love to see children have more time to eat their meals—my own grandson tells me that he doesn't have enough time to finish his food in school.

Since the last time that I came to speak before this committee, the Smart Snack rule has been implemented. This rule requires that all foods sold at school during the school day meet the nutrition standards. The Smart Snacks in School regulation applies to foods sold a la carte (or outside of the reimbursable meal), in the school store, vending machines, and any other venues where food is sold to students. Many districts feared that they would not be able to comply with these standards and that they would lose a la carte sales, which are often essential in helping to balance a tight budget. In Burke County, I have been able to find almost any product that you can imagine to meet the criteria. We offer items like ice cream and cookies that the kids love. In conversations with my colleagues across the country, they have shared that the school nutrition industry has done a great job providing a large variety of items that meet the standards. We need to protect our nutrition standards from loopholes that would undermine the intent of the program, which is to provide a healthy food environment at school.

I do have a concern about a loophole that is currently undermining the Smart Snacks rule. I spent some time last week with directors from across the state of Georgia and I heard quite a bit of frustration around exemptions for fundraisers. Currently state agencies can set the reasonable number of days where fundraisers are exempt from following the Smart Snacks standards. In Georgia, the fundraiser exemption is applicable for 90 of my 180-day school calendar—that's half of my operating days! This varies from state to state; some states have no exemptions while others have diluted the standards by setting an unreasonable number of fundraiser exemption days. This has been problematic for some of

our school nutrition programs wanting to start Breakfast in the Classroom. They can't get the program off the ground because children are choosing popular, fast-food restaurant breakfast sandwiches being sold by a fundraiser at the front door of the school. We must revisit the exemption process so that we can maintain the integrity and intent of the Smart Snack standards.

I'm also proud of how we have met the needs of our community. When our high school football coach came to me with concerns about his players not getting the fuel they need to be successful. We worked together to provide dinner after practices to make sure that the athletes were well nourished. As a registered dietitian nutritionist, it brought me great joy to know these students weren't just filling up on empty calories, but nutritious foods that were good for them.

Not to say it wasn't challenging. Running the after school supper program can be administratively burdensome and difficult to comply with two different regulatory agencies. But we knew that students were hungry and didn't have access to food after school, so we make it work.

Like many communities around the country, when it comes to access to summer meals for kids – our rural community faced challenges in delivering meals. Burke County is 836 square miles of land but only has 22,000 residents. Traditional feeding sites simply did not meet all of the needs of our community. I worked with my district and our community to find solutions and we now run 15 bus routes and more than 100 stops throughout the county, feeding over 2,500 children daily for eight weeks during the summer. We collect book donations so that every child in our bus program gets at least one book to bring home. We also provide the food for programs in the community that are operating summer enrichment programs like vacation bible school, band camp, ROTC camp, and the public library. We are getting healthful foods to kids when they need it, and also providing employment for my staff during the summer. In communities like ours, that matters.

Now that I've shared some of the highlights of our program, you're probably wondering "what is the cost of running a successful program?"

I am feeling the strain of labor and insurance costs, but this makes it even more critical that we keep participation high by providing healthy, balanced and appealing meals to the students. I am not here today to tell you that it is easy, but I am here to tell you that it is possible to meet nutrition standards and be financially solvent.

We are a fiscally sound program because we offer fresh fruits and vegetables that are in season. We work with Burke County farmers to provide local fruits and vegetables at very competitive prices. Coupled with the long shelf life of those products, we have very little spoilage. In fact, I have had local farmers beating down my door to set up contracts with me. In the school nutrition world, we call this a win-win-win.

It's a win for the farmers because they have a guaranteed market. It's a win for kids because we serve the local produce that they want. And it is a win for our community because we are investing into the local economy and reducing our carbon foot print. We use our commodity dollars very wisely to purchase food that helps stretch our food dollars. We also do a lot of scratch cooking which helps control the food cost and reduce the sodium content of our meals.

In Burke County I am lucky to have up-to-date equipment and staff with the expertise to deliver an appealing, well-balanced meal for students. During my term as the 2017-2018 President of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, I visited all parts of the country and saw first-hand the school districts, in neighborhoods of varying economic levels, that did not have the same level of resources available to them. The Academy created a video and held a briefing for members of Congress to communicate the

real need for modern equipment. I have provided the video link in my written comments, so you can see the equipment needs for yourself<sup>1</sup>.

While these districts were meeting all the required nutrition standards, I had great empathy for the amount of effort necessary to meet the requirements. Some of these districts were working with equipment almost as old as the program itself – more than 70 years old! In one large district we visited, with more than 15 schools, there was only one functioning oven. Some of the districts didn't even have walk-in coolers and freezers, which are imperative to serve fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables. Meanwhile, in my district, I have state-of-the-art equipment like combi ovens and tilting skillets in every school!

We could do more for our students nationally if reimbursement was increased to accommodate rising food costs and if there was supplemental funding for equipment and training needs. But we will do worse for students if we lower the bar to accommodate costs by not serving kids what they need to thrive.

In closing, I thank each of you for taking the time to listen to our story from Burke County schools and for your commitment to students throughout the country through supporting child nutrition programs. I respectfully ask each of you to keep children's best interests in mind as you move forward with the reauthorization of child nutrition programs that impact so many children across the country.

We demand the best of our schools and for our students in every other part of the campus – and our cafeteria should be no different.

Thank you once again Chairman Bonamici, Ranking Member Comer and all the committee members. I would be happy to respond to any questions that you may have.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://image-base.wistia.com/medias/1xfi90t90k>