

**Testimony of Brandon Lipps
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**To the U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor
Civil Rights and Human Services Subcommittee**

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12:00 pm, Virtual

Thank you, Chairwoman Bonamici, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members of the Committee for the opportunity to discuss the lessons learned during my time leading the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) as the Deputy Under Secretary for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services (FNCS) mission area.

I am Brandon Lipps, and I am currently a principal at Caprock Strategies, LLC. I believe in bringing together stakeholders across the food, agriculture, and anti-poverty sectors to solve big problems so regular people can thrive. During my time as Deputy Under Secretary, I committed to hearing directly from the families we served, and those that serve them, as often as possible. This resulted in dozens of roundtables, listening sessions, and site visits to schools, parks, childcare centers, food banks, WIC clinics and other providers. Those of us who live and work inside the D.C. Beltway should remember that the best feedback comes from the families served by these programs and the individuals embedded in their local communities.

The USDA Food and Nutrition Service's (FNS) child nutrition programs are critical to ensuring that America's children have the nutrition they need to grow, develop, and ultimately thrive as productive adults. FNS's child nutrition programs begin with pregnant mothers and continue until adulthood. Our youngest children are served by the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and

Children (WIC) which consistently shows measured success in increasing the health of participating children. As children grow, they benefit from the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and ultimately the National School Meals Programs. The School Meals Program, at its core, ensures that our nation's schoolchildren are nourished and not distracted by hunger when they are trying to learn. Additional programs like the Farm to School program allow kids to learn first-hand where their food comes from, and how to nurture the ingredients that will ultimately nurture their bodies.

My interactions with children, school lunch professionals, policymakers and the programs themselves during my time at USDA confirmed that real change happens when we meet families where they are and empower them with the tools they need to take the next step – a concept that we called “moving families forward.”

At USDA I learned that in its simplest form, handing out food is the easy part. Advancing the long-term nutritional and educational needs of our children is nuanced and requires local partners who invest daily in learning the specific needs of their children and meeting them at ground level.

I implore you to listen to that view from the ground when writing new policy on these important programs. That view is significantly different in rural Texas than it is in suburban Virginia, and different in Alaska than it is in Puerto Rico. Please consider input from local providers in all areas, not just those with access to a particular set of coveted resources.

The dedicated local individuals who serve our children are committed to the best for each child they serve. The best food, the best nutrition, and the best care. They do not see students as numbers or regulations, but individuals with differing needs and strengths. As policymakers, I ask that you trust those caregivers who interact with children every day and extend flexible tools for local partners to meet our families where they are and empower them to move forward.

During my travels on behalf of USDA, feedback from children, families and local providers affirmed that child nutrition programs need to be flexible, modernized, and simplified. Providers want to spend time serving our children and less time sorting through complicated regulations, using decades old technology, and sifting through piles of paperwork for multiple programs that often serve the same children.

Flexibilities

School Meal Pattern Requirements

FNS's 2012 school meals regulations were implemented as a result of the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act and significantly increased the nutritional requirements for school meals. Overall, these regulations have increased the amount of fruits, vegetables and whole grains and decreased the overall calories and sodium in our school meals. *This is an exciting accomplishment that should be celebrated.*

However, overly restrictive regulations have tended to make school meals less palatable. Despite significant increases in free school meal participation through various allowances in the law, National School Lunch Program participation has declined by more than *2 million students per day* since the 2012 regulations.

The local individuals who serve our children meals day-in and day-out are deeply committed to serving nutritionally rich meals that support the health outcomes of the children they serve. They are also deeply committed to serving meals that their children will consume. Policymakers must provide the minimum flexibilities needed to serve nutritious meals our children will actually eat.

Early in my tenure at USDA, I visited an inner-city charter school served by a trained chef. And yet, I sat at a table where children did not eat most of their food. Half of the children at my table spent their lunch period trading cards for food from the one boy who had brought his lunch from home.

This and other site visits are consistent with the data in USDA's most recent School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study. In fact, the study reports that over 30 percent of food served in school meals is wasted. Significantly, one quarter of vitamins A, C, D, calcium and potassium are wasted. A meal that scores 100 on nutrient availability, minus 30 percent in the trash bin, scores a barely passing grade. USDA's current regulations are based on the best available science of the perfect meal, but the science is worthless if children don't eat the food.

As you look toward child nutrition reauthorization, I encourage you to give school nutrition professionals permanent flexibilities, especially within the dairy, sodium, and whole grain categories. Noting the challenges across these categories, Congress and USDA, under both Democratic and Republican leadership, have provided annual exemptions and waivers across these three categories since 2012,

creating a complicated and time-consuming labyrinth of policies for providers, states and USDA to navigate.

We can't expect our school lunchrooms to bear the entire burden of changing our children's nutrition choices in less than 20 minutes a day. Congress must provide our local child nutrition providers the flexibility they need while empowering families with the tools to make better nutrition choices. *Cut the time spent on paperwork; give school nutrition professionals standard flexibility to serve delicious, nutritious food.*

Summer Food Service Program

The Summer Food Service Program is an important intervention to offset childhood food insecurity during the summer when schools are not in session. The SFSP provides food that meets nutrition requirements similar to the school meals programs. However, SFSP reaches only about 15 percent of the low-income children served through school meals. Several factors influence this low participation rate but most significantly, many children lack transportation to reach a congregate feeding site like a park or community center where meals are served.

Providers and families have told policymakers for several years that non-congregate options would allow for better access to food for more of America's low-income children. In a country as diverse as America, no one solution works for all of our children. *Congress should authorize a full toolbox that empowers local providers to select the options that best serve the children in their own communities.*

The pandemic provided an opportunity to test a number of solutions on a large scale. From pandemic EBT, to bus routes run by schools and food banks, to the emergency Meals-to-You program, numerous options have proven successful in increasing the delivery of healthy food to America's children. Each of these programs operate in a unique manner that allows local providers to meet families where they are.

As a prime example, and untested before the pandemic, a public private partnership between USDA, the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty and Pepsico's Food for Good allowed Emergency Meals-to-You to quickly deliver almost 40 million nutritious meals to more than 270,000 verified low-income rural children in 43 states when children were furloughed from school. Options like Meals-to-You that deliver food that meets the SFSP meal pattern requirements ensure the program does its job of meeting families

where they are, while delivering nutrition to the doorsteps of kids that otherwise would not have access to it.

Modernization

To serve families well, the programs must continually modernize as an ongoing part of program administration. Modernization can be time consuming, resource intensive, and difficult as change is implemented at the federal level, through state agencies, and ultimately through local partners. But when these resources are aligned, modernization can actually happen quickly and successfully, providing great benefit to the families served by the respective programs. Policymakers owe it to the families served by these programs to ensure that programs are modernized to continually move families forward. We need look no further than the dramatic expansion of the SNAP online pilot across dozens of states in the midst of the pandemic for a successful model with a speedy rollout.

Simplicity

Child nutrition providers across the spectrum of programs have asked for simpler program regulations. After all, what local providers want most is to spend time investing in the very kids they serve each and every day. The less administrative burden required, the more time they can spend with those children. Policymakers must always consider the delicate balance between administrative reductions and integrity, but within that, allow modifications to reduce administrative burdens.

Many school food authorities serve meals through school meals programs, CACFP and SFSP. To do so, they are required to complete applications that are often redundant and time-consuming. And subsequently, to provide multiple, sometimes duplicative reports across each of the programs. Food banks and other providers have also expressed concern over the time required to fill out separate applications and reports across similar suites of programs.

These local providers are serving healthy food to children in need, regardless of the name of the program. *Congress should consider opportunities to streamline and simplify providing services across this suite of programs.* Ultimately, this would allow providers to spend more time helping the children they serve and less time in the office doing paperwork.

Empowering Providers and Parents

Policymakers must consider opportunities to allow those professionals in local schools to meet our children's needs and teach them about nutrition in ways that empower them to take ownership of healthy choices as they grow.

One of the best examples of such a program is the Farm to School Program. This program not only increases fresh, local food in our school lunchrooms, but it empowers our children to make healthy choices for nutrition and life.

During my tenure at USDA, I visited a school in San Antonio, Texas. This particular campus had a farm where students got their hands dirty growing their own fresh produce. As I toured the farm, students told me how the farm had inspired them to learn more about both agriculture and nutrition. One student told me that her work at her campus farm had inspired her to aim for college, majoring in biology. She will be a first-generation college student.

Later, as students entered the lunch line, they were offered fruits and lettuces from their garden -- no sugar, no dressing. One after another, I watched these children independently choose and eat their fruits and leafy green lettuces. For these kids, change happened in their community garden. Change always happens in community and investing in hands-on learning improved these kids' nutrition in ways regulations never could have.

In closing, I want to thank the Committee for your engagement on the important issue of child nutrition and your support for these critical programs. I know the effort required to develop legislation of this size and complexity. As you consider reauthorizing these important programs, I urge you to consider how each of them can change real kids' lives in community and be a tool of empowerment to move families forward.