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Rep. Dale Kildee Opening Statement for the Subcommittee hearing on “Examining the Costs of Federal Overreach into School Meals”

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. Dale Kildee (D-MI), the senior Democrat of the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce for the hearing on “Examining the Costs of Federal Overreach into School Meals”

Good morning. We are here today to examine implementation of the landmark child nutrition law Congress passed last year, including the proposed new nutrition standards. As some of you may know, the first federal school meal programs began under President Harry Truman, who recognized in the aftermath of World War II that thousands of young men could not pass the physical for military service due to malnutrition.

In response, Congress passed the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act in 1946, which created the National School Lunch Program to help put American children on a lifelong path to proper health and nutrition. Back then, we were worried about kids not getting enough calories, but today, we are also worried about them getting too many.

Childhood obesity is a devastating epidemic that threatens our nation’s health care system and national security.

Senior military leaders estimate that more than 27 percent of Americans age 17 to 24 (over nine million men and women) are too heavy to join the military. Being overweight or obese is the top reason why applicants fail to qualify for military service.

Obesity causes heart disease, cancer and diabetes. This epidemic adds nearly \$150 billion per year to national health care costs, about half of which are paid by taxpayers through Medicare and Medicaid. As we did more than 60 years ago, Congress again must address this crucial issue. With one-third of children classified as overweight or obese, the status quo is unacceptable. All children deserve healthy and nutritious meals.

In my own experience as a high school teacher, I saw children come to school hungry because they hadn't eaten a healthy breakfast. As a result, they had difficulties paying attention in school and suffered academically.

At that time, there was no school breakfast program in place to address these inequalities, and I felt compelled to personally help these needy children.

Last year, Congress passed S. 3307, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, with bipartisan support. The bill passed the Senate with unanimous consent, and then the House through support on both sides of the aisle. In fact, more than 1,300 anti-hunger, public health, anti-poverty, education and faith groups supported our work.

The bill improves the nutritional quality of school meals to make the best use of taxpayer dollars. It supports districts that comply with new federal nutrition standards, which haven't been updated in 15 years and have fallen behind current dietary recommendations. The bill also expands access to afterschool and summer meal programs, as well as introducing children to local agriculture through Farm to School programs.

Over the past few decades, school nutrition has improved. But sadly, many meals are still too high in saturated fat and sodium, and children aren't getting enough fruits, vegetables and whole grains. While there are many forward-thinking leaders in school nutrition programs, they cannot make the necessary changes alone.

As the USDA implements the law through a science-based process, we should draw from the many success stories and continue to examine how best to make school meal programs work effectively and efficiently. This will be a deliberative process that will consist of proposed regulations, public comments, rulemaking and oversight. But one thing is certain: we cannot move backwards. Our country and our children cannot afford that.

<http://democrats.edworkforce.house.gov>