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## School Nutrition Proposal

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The new standards for school meals, while important, have had a devastating effect on schools in Maine and the nation. Across the nation, the prices of food and milk have risen and combined with the high labor and benefit costs, 78.3% of school nutrition programs have experienced an increase as a result of implementing nutrition standards. School nutrition directors report double digit price increases for foods critical to providing foods vital to a balanced meal. 88% of responding districts indicated that the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) reimbursement was not sufficient for their program to cover the costs of producing a meal. While schools are received a bonus reimbursement of .06 through Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFK), it is costing .35 to .45 for each meal with the new standards; this is a classic unfunded mandate.

Many agree new standards were needed but they also agree that it has been “too much too soon” and that students and budgets are experiencing extreme difficulty with the changes. Senator King has developed four proposals that will align with the USDA’s mission to provide healthy meal options for students and provide adequate support to Food Service Directors as they implement these standards.

### **Four Proposals**

1. Create a School Nutrition Advisory Committee (SNAC) to advise the USDA
2. Allowing all food items that are permitted to be served as part of a reimbursable meal to be sold at any time as an a la carte item
3. Allow a “No, thank you – Taste” option to allow children to taste healthy foods without taking the full amount
4. Evaluate the impact of volume purchasing for rural school nutrition programs to consider a “Geographic Isolation Bonus”

### **School Nutrition Advisory Committee (SNAC)**

School Nutrition Program Directors need to have more of an opportunity to communicate with the USDA as policies are being developed as they are responsible for final implementation. Thus, we would like to propose a School Nutrition Advisory Committee (SNAC) to the USDA comprised of Food Service Directors and School Administration from across the nation and members from relevant sectors to advise the USDA.

- We propose the creation of the School Nutrition Advisory Committee (SNAC) as a natural step in the forward progression and improvement of the USDA’s policies and understanding of the School Nutrition Programs.
  - The USDA has committees that advise on various subjects from trade in animal and animal products to organic standards, poultry improvement and many more.
  - School Nutrition Programs are vitally important to school systems nationwide and committee designated to the understanding of schools economic and nutritional need is essential for the USDA to move forward and improve the regulation and standards set for our children’s health.
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- We propose a mix of 10 members representing a variety of socio-economic school systems in which each of the four regions reside. Region Committee members will be comprised of seven Food Service Directors and three from School Administration (two from administration, one teacher)
- 12 national members; seven selected from relevant industries concerning school nutrition and food business, one from the School Nutrition Association, one from the National School Board Association, one from National Education Association, one from National Superintendents Association, and an outside representative from the Small Business Administration.

### **A La Carte Proposal**

School Nutrition Programs receive revenue from the federal state and local governments, but that is seldom enough to sustain a program. Most schools supplement their income by operating an a la carte line that sells a variety of foods at regular retail value. In this way many School Nutrition Programs operate as a small business within the structure of the public schools.

Under the 2013 standards under the new USDA restrictions, “a la carte” foods have to comply with the set limits on fats, calories, sugars, and sodium. The fatty foods in a la carte lines have already been replaced with healthier alternatives like baked chips, trail mix, diet sodas, yogurts, salads, lower-calorie sports drinks and low-fat hamburgers. Additional restrictions on ala carte items went into effect on July 1, 2014. This change will likely reduce revenue for schools at a time when their costs are increasing. Allowing all food items that are permitted to be served as part of a reimbursable meal to be sold at any time as an a la carte item would provide some regulatory and financial breathing room for struggling schools.

- The a la carte lines are an important revenue resource for schools.
- School Nutrition Programs have to operate like a small business within a public institution, making enough revenue to continue to feed their children.
- Schools are not getting the financial resources they need from the public sector.

### **No, Thank You – Taste Proposal**

Under the current requirements, chefs are required to pass out 1/2 cup of vegetables and fruits per meal and children are required to take them. This is a well-intentioned effort for schools to “educate” children’s palettes and begin to teach children how to enjoy a variety of healthy foods. While a Harvard study in Massachusetts states the new standards did not result in an increased average food waste per person, individual schools are in fact reporting a high rate of waste. One Maine Food Service Director discussed a day when her program served 138lbs. of vegetables and 90lbs of vegetables were scraped into waste. This was similar to stories from other Maine Directors.

Furthermore, children are less likely to come back for school lunches if they have had an upsetting experience getting lunch. While it may seem like a minor issue, Dr. Anne Marie Albano of the Columbia University Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders (CUCARD) agreed that for some children, certain foods can be anxiety producing. Often times, children who have anxieties about food have had a bad experience – such as choking or vomiting – with a certain food or texture; thus, when confronted with that food or a food similar to it, they will refuse to eat it. In her experience, exposing these children to foods a small amount at a time – “exposure” – is the most effective way to increasing their tolerance and even enjoyment of food. In her opinion, the “No, thank you-taste” option is an excellent voluntary “stepping up” plan that would help expose children to foods they may not think they would otherwise enjoy.

- A voluntary “No, thank you – Taste” option would allow a 1/4 of a cup of the vegetable or fruit that the student would like to reject all together.
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- USDA, in conjunction with Food Service Directors will study ways to reduce plate waste and report recommendations to the appropriate Committee.
- This option would allow the chefs to encourage the students to “taste” the food without forcing it upon them.
- We believe that students will be more likely to try the option if they do not feel intimidated by the amount of the seemingly undesirable food on their plate.
- Further, this will gradually increase and develop young children’s palettes and the next time they see that food item, if they enjoyed it, they will take the full amount.

## **The Geographic Isolation Bonus Study and Report Issue/Background**

Small and rural schools face unique hardships of purchasing food and supplies. Rural school districts that are far away from manufacturing sites and even when they are using all available resources they are still being disadvantaged by their size which in turn, reduces their ability to negotiate prices of food and transportation of food. Smaller bulk purchases and even delivery surcharges impact their cost of production. Their higher costs to implement the same regulations as a larger urban school should be reflected in the funding formula.

There is a precedent for creating tiered funding mechanisms based on unique circumstances. School food authorities that are certified to be in compliance with the updated meal requirements receive an additional six cents of federal cash reimbursement for each meal served. Higher reimbursement rates are in effect for Alaska and Hawaii in recognition of their higher costs. There is also a higher reimbursement rate for school districts with higher rates of low income students. We believe that USDA should evaluate the conditions of small rural schools to determine if the subsidy should be adjusted based on the unique circumstances.

- FY 2017: evaluate the increased costs to rural schools based on low volume purchasing and higher transportation costs and the impact this has on the viability of rural school nutrition programs.
- USDA reports the data and recommendations to the Finance Committee.

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