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School Food, at the Head of the Class

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Last week, a bipartisan group in congress introduced a bill that would prohibit school sales of foods low in nutrient value. The bill would apply to all foods sold in all schools to all children — the exception being the official school lunch provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National School Lunch program. This call to action by Congress supports parental concerns about their children’s health and puts pressure on the federal government to make major programmatic changes that benefit child nutrition. It is a positive step toward ensuring a healthful future for our children, but needs to take on more. This bill is an opportunity to demand the same regulation over the National School Lunch Program.

Consistently, America has proven reluctant to acknowledge the national decline in child health that is directly linked to the downward spiral of the National School Lunch Program accompanied by a steady rise in competitive foods sold in school lunch rooms, vending machines and convenience stores. Americans have shown little interest in the issue, and present a façade of unwillingness to acknowledge that the cheap, “grab’n go” foods of today are only benefiting corporate giants — making rich fast foodies richer while increasing weight-related health care needs. The bottom-line projection shows that it won’t be long until American households are slammed with expenses as a result of their fast and frugal food choices — annual medical costs related to obesity hit \$127 million this past year.

The origin of the problem is easy to pinpoint — and it starts at school. In this fast-paced and penny-pinching society, families rely on the cheapest, most convenient meals for nourishment between hockey practices and science project all-nighters. These busy families look to schools to feed their children one, if not two affordable, nutrient rich meals per day for ten months of every year. Parents are pacified by the nutrition-based promises of a National School Lunch Program that now serves more and more meals that resemble fast food fare, and are confident that their children are being fed quality products that are good for them. This leaves a big question mark when they find that over one-third of their children are overweight, almost one-quarter are obese and over twelve percent have type 2 diabetes

30 million students participate in the National School Lunch Program, and 9 million in the School Breakfast Program, with a price tag of over \$7 billion in tax payer’s money. In 1946, the National School Lunch Program was established to provide stable family farm economies and nutritious meals for low-income students. Today, school menus are laden with commodity-based processed foods like chicken nuggets and canned fruit in high-fructose corn syrup, while fresh, whole foods are absent from the USDA commodities list. Instead, pre-prepared pork taco filling is the newest addition to an approved foods list that features batter-coated French fries as a fresh vegetable.

Unfortunately, the USDA’s primary responsibility was never, and is not, to promote good health in schools, but to foster the development of American agriculture. As American agriculture has changed, more-and-more representing ever growing, commodity-driven agri-business, the National School Lunch Program has evolved in tandem to become an initiative that places the financial interests of industrial farmers before the health of our children. Commodity based subsidies are at the heart of it all, and the health interests of our children are shelved time and time again to boost agricultural profitability.

In the past year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has made terrifying statements — of the children born in the year 2000, 30 – 40% will contract diabetes in their lifetime and those same six year olds

may be the first generation to die at a younger age than their parents based strictly on their diets. We need school lunch and child nutrition to be the number one priority represented across the political platforms of our House representatives, Senators, governors, mayors and school board members.

Last week, the bold moves of sponsoring Senators Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and Tom Harkin (D-IA) among others, brought the issue of child nutrition back to the fore front. They have shown that parents, educators, administrators, and legislators have the capacity to demand policy change on all levels — district, state and federal. Placing both school lunch and agriculture on the USDA's plate has seriously tipped the scales in favor of agri-business. A rapid redefinition of the National School Lunch Program, from its parent agency to its nutritional guidelines, is the only hope our children have of achieving a lifetime of health and economic balance. Universal school lunch must be undertaken as a public health initiative. And what better agency to spearhead school lunch reform than the CDC or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, both with interests grounded in public health and well being; take your pick.

Chef Ann Cooper is the director of Nutrition Services for the Berkley Unified School District and an outspoken advocate for school lunch reform.