

Presentation at Regional Meeting on Child Nutrition, Food and Health
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I'm very pleased to be here today.

I want to thank Mayor Menino and his wonderful staff and the Kellogg Foundation for convening this discussion. And I want to thank Mayor Menino for his leadership on this important issue of addressing childhood hunger.

Most of you know my organization, but for those of you who don't, the Food Research and Action Center ("FRAC") is a policy advocacy and research organization, based in Washington, D.C., with special expertise in federal nutrition programs. FRAC is committed to ending hunger in the United States.

I'm going to quickly give some context, and then some specific thoughts about child nutrition reauthorization.

President Obama has made an extraordinarily important commitment to end childhood hunger in the U.S. by 2015. And it is great that Secretary Vilsack and Deputy Secretary Merrigan have frequently reiterated that commitment.

We think the way to reach this goal is pretty clear, and we have summarized the strategy in a paper on "Ending Childhood Hunger By 2015: The Essential Strategies for Achieving the President's Goal." That can be found on our web site, www.frac.org. Basically:

- the nation needs to restore economic growth and create more jobs at family-supporting wages;
- we need to strengthen income supports for low-income families, such as refundable tax credits;
- we need to greatly strengthen the food stamp program (SNAP) and child nutrition programs – both in terms of participation and quality of nutrition; and
- we need to get all families convenient access to reasonably priced, healthy food in their communities.

In this context, child nutrition reauthorization is the second opportunity to take some big strides toward the President's 2015 goal. It's the second because this year's economic stimulus bill – the ARRA – gave a boost to food stamp allotments (although only temporarily), and a boost to low-income refundable tax credits (though only temporarily) like the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit.

Now it's time to do child nutrition reauthorization. One point is important at the outset: the child nutrition programs, while they need many crucial improvements, are gems of public investment and public policy, reducing hunger and obesity, boosting health and development and learning. They have a great array of important strengths. And while nutrition in schools and child care is not good enough and needs to be much better, it is typically better than what kids bring from home or get if they leave campus to eat.

FRAC co-chairs with the School Nutrition Association a coalition called the Child Nutrition Forum. It has dozens of national members—they range from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Society for Nutrition Education to Catholic Charities, SEIU and AARP, to the National Conference of State Legislators and the U.S. Conference of Mayors, to NEA and the National Council of La Raza.

The Forum has put out a statement of principles for reauthorization that has been endorsed by more than 2,300 Hill and state groups.

It has three key areas of recommendations:

- 1) strengthening program access for underserved children and communities – i.e., getting more kids into the programs.
- 2) enhancing nutrition quality and improving meal reimbursements; and
- 3) simplifying program administration.

In the limited time I have, I am going to talk about three or four aspects of the access goal – ways to get more low-income children the nutrition they need, and thereby tackling childhood hunger and start reaching the President's 2015 goal.

I'll start with school breakfast. School breakfast is like a miracle drug for students and schools in its effect on health, test results, behavior and obesity. But only about 46 low-income children eat school breakfast every day for every 100 who eat school lunch.

Reauthorization should invest in letting schools which have a substantial proportion of low-income children offer all children breakfast for free. Often called “universal breakfast,” this approach reduces the stigma that “breakfast is just for poor kids” and attracts children from all income groups to the program.

But even with that step, there still are some real barriers when breakfast is served in the cafeteria before the regular school day starts: transportation problems and bus schedules; kids' understandable desire to play rather than go in and eat; even back-ups at school security. More and more schools are starting to serve breakfast in the classroom, brought in from the cafeteria or picked up from carts by students in the hallways.

This solves a host of problems, and teachers love it once it has been instituted. Child nutrition reauthorization needs to support these programs as well, especially in low-income schools.

As a related matter, we need in child nutrition reauthorization to allow cities to do away with school meal applications and move to claiming federal funds through periodic statistical sampling of the family incomes of children in school, as Philadelphia has been allowed to do for a number of years. When a city does it that way, it saves the schools money and opens the door to offering both lunch and breakfast to all kids for free. As Ricardo Salvador from Kellogg indicated earlier, that is a key strategy.

Second, we need to strengthen the programs for young children in child care and school-aged children in afterschool programs.

Years ago Congress eliminated the ability of child care providers to get paid for three meals/day – limiting reimbursement to two no matter how many hours children are in care. This silly decision to save some money at the expense of pre-schoolers is particularly counter-productive when so many children are in care for such long hours as more and more low-income parents work long and non-traditional hours. If we don't fix it, too many children will go hungry and too many children will eat less than healthy food which financially strapped child care providers give them when the meal has no federal dollars (and therefore no federal standards) attached to it.

And children need suppers in afterschool too. The current system to pay for suppers for children in afterschool just doesn't work – it has too many restrictions and too much paperwork – except in the 10 states Congress has let into a special pilot program where it funds suppers in afterschool programs in low-income neighborhoods. We need child nutrition reauthorization to extend that successful pilot to all states.

Finally, we need to fix a broken summer food program. Hunger and obesity spike in the summer when children don't have regular school year lunch and breakfast, but only one in six of the children who get regular year lunch get summer food, even at the peak of summer food programs.

We need an improvement in the “area eligibility” test which defines the neighborhoods or geographic areas in which the government will fund summer food (and afterschool food and family child care food) programs. And we need to invest in funding to get more schools, parks and recreation agencies, other public agencies, and non-profits to run summer food and activity programs, with healthy food, for the whole summer and with enough federal dollars that they can serve healthy food and break even.