Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

May 16, 2016

Chairman John Kline
U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce
2176 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Ranking Member Robert C. "Bobby" Scott
U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce
2176 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Chairman Todd Rokita
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
1717 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Ranking Member Marcia L. Fudge
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
2344 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Scott, Chairman Rokita, and Ranking Member Fudge:

We write today to express our concerns with the recently introduced Child Nutrition and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Reauthorization legislation, the *Improving Child Nutrition and Education Act of 2016*. Given that 31 million students depend on these programs for nutritious and accessible meals, Congress should prioritize strengthening these successful programs through reauthorization, not enact misguided changes that would hurt our children by reducing their access to nutritious meals.

Specifically, we are concerned with substantial changes to the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (Summer EBT) program, the school meals verification process, and changes to nutrition standards included in this bill that would cause too many children, especially low-income children and children of color, to lose access to these vital programs and healthier meals.

One of the most successful programs to come out of the last Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) in 2010 was the inclusion of CEP. This provision allowed for high-poverty school districts to offer universal school meals to *all* students without the addition of burdensome and often stigmatizing paperwork for families. To be eligible for CEP, school districts currently have to demonstrate that at least 40 percent of their students are already certified for free meals through other federal programs—such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This 40 percent requirement is for a subset of the low-income students in the school. Many more low-income children attend the school, but are certified for free or reduced-price school meals by submitting a school meal application. In its first two years of nationwide implementation, CEP has been an overwhelming success.

According to two recent reports by the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), CEP provides more than 8.5 million low-income students with access to free meals without paperwork or stigma. The Improving Child Nutrition

and Education Act of 2016, however, would unacceptably raise the qualifying threshold for CEP from 40 percent to 60 percent. To say this change would be detrimental would be an understatement. Raising the threshold to 60 percent would lead to far fewer schools qualifying for the program and more low-income children going hungry every day. According to CBPP and FRAC, if this bill becomes law, 7,022 schools now using community eligibility would have to reinstate applications and return to monitoring eligibility in the lunch line within two years. Another 11,647 schools that qualify for community eligibility, but have not yet adopted it, would automatically lose eligibility. These districts do not have the framework, funding, or capacity to deal with the considerable amount of administrative work that comes with increasing the CEP threshold.

Additionally, the ten percent verification framework featured in this bill adds unnecessary barriers that would limit many low-income children's access to essential meals. We understand that preserving the program's integrity is important, but we believe that Congress must focus on improving and expanding direct certification—an approach that has been shown to improve program integrity. Furthermore, this bill does nothing to address the barriers faced by eligible families who are currently not accessing these benefits as a result of a lack of awareness. In 2014, more than 17 million households were deemed food insecure, including 3.7 million households with children. We should make every effort possible to help children access the proper nutrition that is vital to their growth, development and success in school and beyond.

We are also deeply concerned with the proposal for the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (Summer EBT) program, which undermines the pilot program that sought to address the substantial gap in child nutrition by ensuring that more kids can eat during the summer months, when they lose access to school lunches. The bill only provides $10 million a year to fund current, or previously operated, EBT programs through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). This funding cut dramatically reduces the number of states eligible to participate in the summer EBT program from ten, to now only three. Instead of cutting this program, we should be expanding it to all states. Additionally, the summer EBT program would be more efficacious by administering it through SNAP, where more children have access to a greater number of food stores. We can and need to ensure robust funding for Summer EBT, especially considering that for every 6 children who get a lunch at school each day; only 1 receives a meal in the summer.

Lastly, the harmful changes to nutrition standards in this bill would roll back important evidence-based standards made in the 2010 reauthorization, which nearly every school in the country is currently meeting. Gutting sodium standards, blocking scientific evidence from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and allowing junk food to be counted as an acceptable snack would undermine our children's health and their future. We know that the 2010 standards have allowed our nation to make meaningful reforms to its core child nutrition programs. It is imperative that we continue to improve school nutrition and the hunger safety net for millions of children because hunger and under-nourishment prevent our kids from reaching their full potential, both physically and academically.

In conclusion, we believe that any CNR legislation must improve access to healthy food in schools and maintain robust nutrition standards that were included in the 2010 reauthorization.

We look forward to working with your committee as you consider CNR and WIC reauthorization.

Sincerely,

Rosa L. DeLauro
Member of Congress

Barbara Lee
Member of Congress

Tony Cárdenas
Member of Congress

Steny H. Hoyer
Member of Congress

James P. McGovern
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