

September 15, 2016

United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator:

On behalf of AASA, The School Superintendents Association, representing 13,000 school system leaders throughout the country, I am writing to oppose the process with which the Improving Child Nutrition Integrity and Access Act (ICNIA) is being advanced. We also remain opposed to the bill itself. We remain committed to working with the Senate to advance reauthorized child nutrition programs that ensure our nation's schools are able to build successful school breakfast and lunch programs, but this cannot happen without the bill following proper procedure allowing time for debate and votes.

AASA and the superintendents we represent recognize that a child must be fed before she/he can learn. Superintendents are keenly aware of the critical role nutrition plays in cognitive development and academic performance in children; a hungry, undernourished child is more likely to be less energetic and less able to concentrate. You can't develop an achieving student when you have a hungry child. We acknowledge the role that our nation's school nutrition program has played in reducing hunger, preparing students to be ready for school and learning, and supporting and promoting student health and wellness. Providing healthy meals and snack options for school children is critical; our members are proud of their strong nutrition programs and are looking for a reauthorization that provides districts with increased flexibility from certain elements of the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010. That said, the reality of ICNIA is that school districts will continue to be hindered by the statute's prescription and to struggle financially and administratively with elements of the federal nutrition program, which come at the expense of their primary responsibility, our students' educational program.

Our priorities in this reauthorization were to address the financial and administrative burden put on districts in the 2010 reauthorization. We are opposed to a repeal of the HHFKA because while there are elements of the bill that are burdensome or stand room for improvement, the reality is that school systems have invested great amounts of time and energy in implementing the programs they successfully run today, and a complete repeal would do far more harm than good.

The largest change in the school nutrition program is a rethinking of verification of school meal applications. Many schools would see a dramatic increase in the numbers of students whose eligibility would need to be verified. While the new system rewards states and districts that have been successful in improving certification of eligibility and increasing the direct verification of students already enrolled in other government programs, it would most strongly hurt the schools currently struggling the most. This could lead to large numbers of students in those schools being removed from the school lunch program and left hungry, leaving food service directors spending many hours on the verification—their time could be much better spent. AASA understands the need to combat waste and to strengthen the integrity of the school nutrition program, but this dramatic change, with no transition time or funding for the increased administrative burden, would negatively impact districts, schools and students nationwide.

The priorities we advanced in reauthorization represented modifications, not complete overhauls, and we remain concerned that the proposed changes aren't substantive enough to provide meaningful relief to schools. This bill does not properly address most of our issues. Our requests of the reauthorization, and those of many of our partners at other associations, were for flexibility from the nutrition standards in four buckets: fruits and vegetables, whole grains, sodium and competitive food. In ICNIA, only two of those issues are directly addressed. In a deal with the Department and the White House, our requests for flexibility in whole grains and sodium are addressed, albeit not fully. However, the bill does not provide flexibility around the fruits and vegetables requirement for reimbursable meals and competitive foods. Rather, the bill calls for a working group and an advisory committee to issue guidance. This does not provide school system leaders who are having difficulty with these provisions with relief, and could be better done through regulation.

The bill does include several elements that would streamline communications between school food authorities, state agencies and USDA. It changes state audits of school nutrition programs from every three years to every five years. The bill also promises a standardized review process and the separation of technical assistance from the review process. This change should allow for more open communication between the school food authority, the state agency and the USDA. The bill also calls for streamlined communications from USDA to the state and local districts and for standardized data sets to be used.

While some of the components of this bill may provide flexibility and lessen administrative burden, those components do not outweigh the deficiencies of the bill. Many of these elements could be implemented through regulation, outside of a comprehensive reauthorization. The child nutrition program is one of the most important pieces of the federal government; by improving child nutrition, we are improving the long-term health of children throughout the country. We want to ensure that when we conduct a reauthorization, the changes included in the program are not only merited, but also substantive enough to be meaningful, and we are concerned that the proposals of ICNIA do not go far enough in providing relief and flexibility to our nation's schools.

We were hoping to work with the Senate as the bill moved to the floor to make improvements and to advance a school nutrition bill we can support, however with an expedited passage, that is no longer an option. If you need additional assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me at 703-203-3105 or lfinnan@aasa.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Leslie Finnan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "L" and "F".

Leslie Finnan
Senior Legislative Analyst