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May 11, 2021

Committee on Education and Labor
Civil Rights and Human Services Subcommittee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the 3 million members of the National Education Association, who teach, support, and nurture students in 14,000 communities across America, we submit these comments for the Subcommittee hearing on the polices and priorities of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).

We applaud President Biden's American Families Plan for proposing to expand the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), increasing the number of high-poverty schools that can participate in community eligibility, and helping end child hunger during the summer by expanding and making permanent Summer EBT. We also support provisions in the plan to decrease the paperwork burden on families and schools by making children who receive Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income automatically eligible for free school meals and providing additional funds for a healthy foods initiative.

However, NEA members believe ensuring that **all** students have access to **free** healthy school meals is crucial to ending hunger. Providing universal school meals to all students, at no cost to them, would improve their health as well as their classroom performance; eliminate the stigma of student meal debt; and relieve schools of complicated and burdensome paperwork. The legislation passed by Congress and the waivers and guidance provided by the USDA in the wake of the pandemic have allowed schools and school food service workers to demonstrate that they can provide meals to students in all communities. We must build on these successes.

We also take this opportunity to highlight NEA's key principles for child nutrition reauthorization. In addition to expanding access to school meals and summer food as described above, we strongly support maintaining the healthy guidelines for school meals; ongoing training and professional development for school food service staff that maximizes hands-on learning and takes place during paid, regular working hours; expanded grants for kitchen equipment; and expanding the Farm to School Grant Program.

We thank you for the opportunity to share these comments as you consider the polices and priorities of the Food and Nutrition Service. We hope the Subcommittee and the Administration will consider providing access to universal healthy school meals for all students to improve children's health and readiness to learn.

Sincerely,

Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations
National Education Association