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ON A UNIVERSAL FREE SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

Mr. Chairman, it is a privilege for me to appear before this Subcommittee to discuss the merits of a Universal Free School Lunch Program. Such a program, embodied in S. 1251, enjoys wide political support. Introduced by the late Senator Hubert Humphrey, Senators McGovern, Clark, and Thurmond join me as a cosponsor. Certainly, this bill was very important to Hubert. I remember discussing this legislation with him last year and I recall the great interest that he had and his firm conviction in how this program would impact on the health and vitality of our children.

I must also say that this program enjoys the support

of many in my home state of North Carolina. Furthermore, the American School Food Service Association has indicated its unequivocal support.

This Subcommittee knows of the importance of good nutrition. Indeed, you, Mr. Chairman, have offered legislation to strengthen this nation's nutrition programs. I commend you for your leadership.

The importance of proper nutrition for the health and sound development of our children is clearly established. The absence of proper or sufficient food for our children interferes with their physical health, and makes it more difficult for them to stay alert, learn, or otherwise develop their minds. It can place serious restraints on their ability to live a happy life as adults, by increasing

their likelihood of having chronic or other health problems, and the possible loss in mental activity may negatively reflect on their chance to go to a college and to get a good job. It would be wrong to place handicaps on young children who are unable to fend for themselves.

A free school lunch would not be another unnecessary government handout. Government requires children to attend school. It pays for their transportation and instruction, buys bats and balls and their textbooks. But at lunch-time, children are expected to hand over varying amounts of money.

The present system already gives free lunches to some students, greatly reduced-price lunches to others, and slightly reduced-price lunches to the remainder. In effect, we have created three classes of students in our schools.

Being singled out for a free or greatly reduced-price lunch is degrading to a child. We were all children once, and most of us have children, and we know what it is like for a child to be singled out for special treatment. And here it is being done for circumstances totally beyond the child's control.

Actually, we are telling our children that some parents have been less effective in providing for their children than others. For this reason, many school children from middle and lower income families, who might otherwise benefit, do not get to take advantage of the present limited program because their parents consider it demeaning.

Meanwhile, some other parents, whose children are not eligible, seek to submit inaccurate information so they

might save a little money and, in the process, transmit their willingness to commit petty fraud to their children.

Schools do not have the means, nor should they be expected, to check out the validity and accuracy of the information in the application forms.

The present system, which provides several different subsidies for the same lunch, imposes a bureaucratic and administrative nightmare on our schools and teachers. The present system of sending out, processing, and evaluating applications is time-consuming, expensive, and frequently arbitrary. It is arbitrary for the reasons mentioned above: some parents whose children are eligible do not submit applications, and others submit inaccurate ones.

Even the process of distributing the tickets or tokens

so that children can get their lunch, is expensive and time consuming. In some schools this is done by administrative employees, which means somebody must be hired to do the work. In other schools, the work is done by teachers, who should be spending their time teaching and planning lessons. Regardless of the method, it reduces class-time for the children, by as much as 30 minutes a day, which does not cost money, but then it does not help them to learn either.

The problems with the present system are so serious that two counties in my state, Edgecombe in the east and Hoake in the west, have gone ahead, without state or federal support, and introduced their own free school lunch programs. This, however, is so novel that there are no rules or regulations to cover the situation, so they are having

some trouble dealing with the Department of Agriculture,
even though the free program costs no more money than the
old one. Now, I do not blame the USDA. The Department
requires guidance over how to deal with this situation,
and the Congress should provide it. Remember, a free
lunch program cannot be cost effective unless many of the
existing bureaucratic requirements can be abolished or
greatly reduced.

Implementing a universal school lunch program would
not cost much more than what is being spent now. By the
time one considers the lowering of costs due to fewer ad-
ministrative requirements and the ability to reduce the
price of each lunch through economies of scale, and the
increase in class time available for useful purposes, the

value of each dollar being spent would be greatly stretched.

Some increase in cost would result because of higher parti-

cipation rates, which are only about 62 percent now, and

the lower contribution required from many families, but the

latter would be money saved as far as the family was concerned.

But we must always keep in mind the great benefit that would

accrue to so many of our children.

Recognizing, however, that it might be difficult to get such a major new initiative as a universal free lunch program approved and implemented, it might be more appropriate to begin by having pilot projects in several states. With this in mind, I will be introducing legislation in the very near future which will authorize a series of pilot projects in various parts of this great nation.

Mr. Chairman, I really believe that a Universal Free Lunch Program would be a prudent and valuable program for this Congress to enact. However, in full recognition of budgetary and political realities, a middle ground must be sought. So, after considerable thought, I have decided that legislation for pilot projects would be both appropriate and acceptable.

I hope that the members of the Subcommittee on Nutrition will give this bill serious consideration when it marks-up child nutrition legislation in May. I certainly will be available to you, Mr. Chairman, to help in this effort. We must remember that it is the children of this country whose futures we are deciding and I submit we have no more precious resource.