

Committee on Education and Labor
Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on "Using School Wellness Plans to Help Fight Childhood
Obesity"

May 10, 2007

Testimony of Chevy Chase

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before your Subcommittee. My name is Chevy Chase. In addition to my work as an actor, I also have worked along with my wife, Jayni, to improve children's health. Together, we founded the Center for Environmental Education Online, a resource for educators and students on health, environmental, and nutrition issues. School nutrition is one of three priority areas of our Center.

As you know, rates of obesity among U.S. children and teens tripled between 1980 and 2002. For individuals born in 2000, the chance of developing diabetes during their lifetime is 39% for females and 33% for males. Almost 40% of girls and one-third of boys are on track to develop diet-related diabetes. This is no laughing matter.

With the growing concern about childhood obesity, many schools are realizing how important it is for children to have access to healthy foods. Vending machines and processed meals are being replaced with fresh, healthy food that is also serving as a central part of student learning each day.

Jayni and I applaud school districts' efforts to implement strong school wellness plans during this past school year. These plans support parents' ability to feed their children a healthful diet. Parents should not have to worry that their children will spend their lunch money on low-nutrition foods from vending machines instead of on balanced school meals. It is time to return parental control of their children's diets to parents, and that means setting strong nutrition standards for schools.

Nationally, more than 80% of schools at all grade levels sell foods and beverages out of vending machines, school stores, or a la carte in the cafeteria. Unfortunately, too many of the choices offered to children are

chips, candy, cookies, sugary beverages and other foods of poor nutritional value. Too many children are building lunches out of HoHos and French fries, which is contributing to the nation's obesity epidemic.

I was surprised to learn that the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) nutrition standards for foods sold in cafeteria snack lines were set in the 1970s and have never been updated. USDA's current standards allow the sale of doughnuts and ice cream but prohibit the sale of seltzer water and breath mints. This standard does not make sense. Outside of the cafeteria, no nutrition standards are in place for foods sold through vending machines and school stores. Congress needs to call on USDA to update its outdated standards and apply them to the whole campus and the whole school day. I strongly support Representatives Woolsey's and Shays' Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act (H.R. 1363), which I urge Congress to pass this year.

While some might say that school nutrition should be solely addressed at the local level, since the Truman administration, the school meal programs have been federal programs. The federal government invests huge amounts of money – \$10 billion in fiscal year 2006 alone – in school lunches and breakfasts. Selling chips, candy, and sugary drinks in schools undermines that taxpayer investment.

Last year, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, the nation's largest soft drink companies, and several snack food companies announced voluntary guidelines for nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold in schools. While their efforts are laudable, these voluntary guidelines are unenforceable and it remains to be seen whether and to what extent schools will accept and comply with them. Child nutrition is too important to leave to chance and voluntary efforts.

As the USDA and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention documented in their report "Making It Happen," students will buy and consume healthful beverages – and schools can make money from selling healthful options. Of 17 schools and school districts they surveyed that tracked income after switching to healthier options, 12 increased revenue and four reported no change. The one school district that did lose revenue in the short term experienced a subsequent revenue increase after the study was completed.

School beverage vending contracts raise only a comparatively small amount of funds. District contract revenues amount to less than half a percent of annual district per-student spending. Also, most of the money

generated from school vending contracts comes from the pockets of students and their parents. Through vending contracts, soft drink companies gain exclusive advertising rights to promote and increase the sale of products in schools.

In closing, Jayni and I would like to encourage school districts across the country to continue to strengthen their wellness plans. In addition, we urge Congress to strengthen the national nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold out of vending machines, school stores, and a la carte in schools by passing Representative Woolsey's bill. The health crisis posed by the childhood obesity epidemic deserves all of our best efforts and attention. Thank you.