



**EARLY CARE
AND EDUCATION
CONSORTIUM**

**Testimony to the United States Department of Agriculture
Food & Nutrition Service, Mid-Atlantic Region
Child Nutrition Reauthorization Listening Session
August 6, 2008**

Mary Beth Salomone, Policy Director
Early Care and Education Consortium
Washington, DC
www.ececonsortium.org

Good morning, Regional Administrator Jackson, and colleagues from around the region. Thank you for this opportunity to offer recommendations for the Child and Adult Care Food Program in the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition legislation.

I am Mary Beth Salomone, Policy Director of the Early Care and Education Consortium, an alliance of America's leading national, regional, and independent providers of quality child care and early learning programs. Consortium members operate more than 7,600 centers enrolling more than 800,000 children in 49 states and the District of Columbia. Consortium members include private non-profit organizations and for-profit companies who offer full-day, full year programs for children birth through age 12, with enrollments that reflect the rich diversity of our communities and nation.

The Child and Adult Care Food Program serves more than two million children in child care each day. CACFP served some 1.85 billion meals and snacks last year alone. A pilot initiative that was made permanent in the 2004 reauthorization of the Child Nutrition bill makes it possible for for-profit child care programs, like many Consortium members, to participate in CACFP. For-profit child care centers can participate so long as at least 25% of their children are in low-income families.

Many of the Consortium members' centers meet and surpass this threshold. Currently, our members participate in CACFP in more than 1,330 child care centers across the country, and serve nearly 107,000 children, many in the USDA's Mid-Atlantic Region. Many thanks to the Consortium members who are participating in these USDA listening sessions, including Learning Care Group, Knowledge Learning Corp., and Brightside Academy.

Consortium members truly appreciate the ability to participate, and the inclusion of for-profit child care programs has contributed to the overall increase of child care center participation in CACFP. Regardless of the tax status of a child care program, children who are hungry need to be served, and child care providers rely on the support of programs like CACFP to make it possible.

Even though 55% of licensed child care providers participate in CACFP, the need is still great for children and for providers. CACFP is critical and we have some real opportunities through the upcoming reauthorization of the program. Our overarching concerns have to do with the increasing price of food, food insecurity for families and communities, and awareness of children's health and obesity issues.

The urgent need for CACFP has increased as families struggle to make ends meet in the face of rising food costs. CACFP helps fill the gap between what families can afford to buy and what

young children need to stay healthy and grow strong. More and more children are coming to child care hungry. Child nutrition programs can support healthy eating habits which help to prevent childhood obesity and other nutrition-related diseases. Nutritious meals served while a child is in care, thanks to CACFP, means each child has access to fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and dairy products. We know children need these things, particularly at this important stage of their development.

The increasing price of food doesn't just impact a family budget. It is making a huge difference in the budgets of child care programs that serve dozens of children every day- sometimes three meals a day. In this time of rising food prices CACFP is an absolutely essential support for child care centers. CACFP is important not just because it provides enough food but because it provides the right foods.

At the same time need is increasing, access to CACFP is declining and nutrition quality is threatened. Providers are struggling to participate in part because reimbursement levels are not keeping up with meal pattern requirements and the increasing price of food, and the unreimbursed expense may be more than a center can cover. For some child care providers, this gap means they have to make some difficult choices. As child development experts, they know the value of a nutritious meal. But CACFP's requirements mean that time, funds and resources have to be diverted from other efforts. Programs are forced to cut corners we don't want them to have to cut as they care for our children each day.

We believe the upcoming reauthorization of the child nutrition programs should provide important opportunities to improve access, meal quality and nutrition. A well-conceived and adequately financed reauthorization bill, focused on the right program improvements, can do much to reduce hunger and food insecurity, improve child nutrition and health, and enhance child development and school readiness. We should expand and improve these programs because we see every day the impact they can have and know that they can do much more.

I offer the following recommendations on behalf of the Consortium and its members:

1. Increase program access by expanding eligibility and increasing reimbursement

- More children could be served if we expanded their eligibility, and if more providers could afford to participate. Make sure reimbursement rates are high enough to adequately cover costs.
- Currently, CACFP reimburses up to two meals and one snack. The reality is programs are serving three full meals each day to children while their parents work to make ends meet. We urge you to add a third meal to the list for children in child care for more than eight hours.

2. Streamline operations and increase flexibility

- The program requires too much paperwork. More children would be served overall if less time is spent on the administration of CACFP.
- Streamline program operations, and maximize technology and innovation to allow providers to operate most effectively.
- Uniformity across states would also be a welcomed improvement.

3. Improve nutritional value of the meals and increase resources for nutrition education for providers, parents and children

- Update the CACFP meal pattern, including recommendations for the reimbursements necessary to cover the costs of the new meal pattern.
- Make nutrition education information available online, for low literacy levels and in multiple languages for families and child care providers.

Thank you for this opportunity to share what we know and would like to see in the future of CACFP. We appreciate the USDA's commitment to these programs and its work in holding these listening sessions, as well as soliciting public comments. We look forward to working with you and our partners to make these recommendations a reality.