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Testimony before the House Education and Workforce Committee

“Serving Students and Families Through Child Nutrition Programs”

April 15, 2015

Thank you, Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Scott, and members of the committee for having me here today.

I am so grateful for the opportunity to be here this morning as you consider the Reauthorization of our federal Childhood Nutrition programs, and to be able to serve the Commonwealth of Virginia in my role as First Lady.

I know we all agree that nothing is more important to our future as a nation than the health, education and well-being of our next generation.

And I know that much of your deliberations around this reauthorization will focus on what and how we serve our students and families through Child Nutrition Programs, but my hope for my own testimony today is to make sure we remember why it’s so important.

I come to this first and foremost, not as a nutritional or educational expert, but simply as a mom.

The Governor and I have made it our mission to take every step we can towards eliminating child hunger in Virginia.

Over the past year, we have joined with our legislative leaders in a bi-partisan effort to support school breakfast participation, pushed to enroll schools in the Community Eligibility Provision, worked to expand summer meal access at schools and libraries across the Commonwealth, and the USDA recently announced that Virginia will manage an \$8.8 Million Demonstration Project Grant to End Child Hunger in the Commonwealth, which will fund an innovative plan we have developed to use schools as food distribution centers in some of our neediest neighborhoods.

While I’m incredibly proud of the way our Commonwealth has come together to tackle this issue and work together towards this goal, ensuring our students are well fed and ready to learn must be a continued partnership between our states and Congress, our schools, community leaders and families.

Programs like CEP, School Breakfast and the Summer Food Service are the best way we can help ensure our children in need take full advantage of the educational opportunities our schools provide and our taxpayers invest in.

In Virginia alone - we invest over \$ 5.5 Billion each year in Education.

If we want to capture our return on that investment, we have to make sure our students are ready and able to learn when they are in our classrooms.

It is both staggering and tragic to learn that for the first time in at least 50 years a majority - 51% - of public school children in the United States qualify for free and reduced lunches.ⁱ

With supportive families and a strong educational system behind them, we know that our students have the power and the potential to break the cycle of poverty.

Unfortunately, hunger remains a painful reality in far too many homes in our great nation. In 2013, more than 17 million households were food-insecure, meaning they were unable to attain or provide adequate food for their families during the year.ⁱⁱ

Nearly half of those households include children.

In Virginia, over three hundred thousand of our children are food insecureⁱⁱⁱ. That is one in six of our kids.

The impact of hunger and malnutrition on children is devastating, well-documented, and obvious to anyone who is a parent or works with children.

Far too many students start the week hungry from the weekend. For many children across the country, and across Virginia, the meals they receive at school are the most consistent and best meal of the day.

How do we prepare the next generation for the jobs of the 21st century? How can we expect our children to be hungry for knowledge, if they are just plain hungry?

Our military leaders, business leaders, community leaders and health care professionals all agree that our future depends on our kids being strong, healthy and well-educated if they are going to be able to lead us into an era of national security and global economic competitiveness.

That is why they have all joined this conversation.

Our faith-based communities, neighborhood pantries and food bank system in Virginia are incredible resources, and do an amazing job.

But they will tell you, the demand keeps growing and it's harder and harder to keep up with the need. It is not a sustainable model, nor is it the best model, for feeding our population in Virginia or nationwide.

School is where most children spend most hours of most days. For many it is the safest place in their community. It's the place their parents trust and know – it's a place where kids' dreams are fostered. It makes sense that school and summer school is the best place to reach our neediest kids.

In my travels and conversations across Virginia, time and again I have met school leaders and teachers who understand that their ability to succeed as educators doesn't start with a lesson plan; it starts with a meal and students who are emotionally available to learn.

A few months ago, my husband and I invited Susan Mele, the principal at Stewardsville Elementary School in the rural community of Bedford County, to meet with us in Richmond.

Susan shared her experience that when students are hungry, it's just too big an obstacle for teachers to overcome to try to teach. Behavioral problems, tardiness, and absenteeism are just a few of the effects of hunger Susan witnessed in her school.

So, Susan has implemented an innovative school breakfast program with a Responsive Classroom program, which is an approach to teaching that incorporates social emotional learning as part of the academic day.

Since implementing this approach, Susan has seen an increase of two percentage points in overall student attendance, plus a significant decrease in tardy arrivals to school and office referrals for behavioral issues.^{iv}

She also reports an improved learning environment because students are no longer hungry and instead are ready and eager to learn. Her teachers also use mealtimes to talk about nutrition and manners, and build important connections between teachers and students, and students and their classmates.

The result: Susan has seen a significant increase in academic performance.

Rather than viewing behavioral issues, social skill development and hunger as separate issues in her school – Susan’s approach has been to provide her students the opportunity to develop social skills while sharing a meal together.

Pamela Smith is a principal at Highland View Elementary School in Bristol in far Southwest Virginia.

Pamela came to Richmond to highlight that, in a school like hers where issues of neglect, trauma, and mental health are far too prevalent, before she and her staff can even begin to teach they have to meet the basic needs of these children.

Not only does Pamela make sure her students start the day with a healthy meal – which she does with great success– but in many cases, the students she helps need to be checked for bruises, be given clean clothes for the day, brush their teeth and hair, or just be loved and listened to.^v

The things Pamela, and her teachers and staff, are doing for these children and families are frankly above and beyond what any school should be tasked with managing, but it is the reality in which far too many must operate.

Pamela has done a tremendous job of reaching the needs of her students during the school year, but an area of constant concern for her is the “summer slide.”

After nine months of working to bring students up to grade level, three months of hunger and unmet basic needs can set students back so far that it leaves Pamela feeling like her kids are trapped in a cycle of one step forward, two steps back.

Pamela and other local leaders have been working to find solutions, but – working within the current parameters of the Summer Food Service Program – the challenge of kids getting to sites in a predominantly rural community has made it tough to put the brakes on the summer slide.

The Governor and I have five children who range from a son in middle school to a daughter who recently graduated from college.

As their parents, we strive to be supportive of our children’s intellectual growth by encouraging them to find their passion and pursue their dreams.

It’s a tragedy that not all children in Virginia or the United States look out on the world and see the endless possibilities that we know should be there for them.

But that's exactly why we are here.

It's our responsibility as public servants to be advocates for the children of this great nation.

When 3 out of 4 public school teachers say that students regularly come to school hungry – it's time to get serious about addressing this need.^{vi}

The good news is that we already know how to get there.

When students eat school breakfast, teachers report profound results.

73% see kids paying better attention in class, 53% see improved attendance, and 48% see fewer disciplinary problems.

But, with results like these, we have to ask ourselves why only half of the students in our schools who are entitled to a free or reduced breakfast are getting them – or why only one in seven low-income children who ate a school lunch during the regular 2012-2013 school year participated in the Summer Nutrition Program?

I'm confident that your deliberations will uncover new ways to serve children and families through the federal nutrition programs. In Virginia, we look forward to partnering with you to find and implement these innovations.

Working together, I know we can guarantee that all of our children are fed, and fed well.

Thank you!

ⁱ Research Bulletin: A New Majority Low Income Students Now a Majority In the Nation's Public Schools, Southern Education Foundation, January, 2015 <http://www.southerneducation.org/Our-Strategies/Research-and-Publications/New-Majority-Diverse-Majority-Report-Series/A-New-Majority-2015-Update-Low-Income-Students-Now>

ⁱⁱ Household Food Security in the United States in 2013, USDA, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ Map the Meal Gap, Feeding America, <http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/map-the-meal-gap/>

^{iv} "Bedford Principal Cuts Disciplinary Referrals 75% in Three Years - Susan Mele says Responsive Classroom Works" <http://www.wdbj7.com/news/local/bedford-principal-cuts-disciplinary-referals-75-in-three-years/24227418>

^v Principal urges Virginia leaders to repeal A-F scale for public schools- Smith shares school's story in new role as liaison to Sen. Carrico http://www.tricity.com/news/principal-urges-virginia-leaders-to-repeal-a-f-scale-for/article_fac8de16-aceb-11e4-8c9c-c34037829869.html

^{vi} 2015 Hunger in our Schools Report, Share Our Strength, hungerinourschools.org/img/NKH-HungerInOurSchoolsReport-2015.pdf