The Politics Behind the National School Lunch Program

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE POLITICS BEHIND THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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BY
JAYLYN N. BROWN
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Christian, this is for you.
One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.

—Virginia Woolf
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<td>HHFKA</td>
<td>Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010</td>
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<td>JAMA</td>
<td>Journal of American Medical Association</td>
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<td>NNFC</td>
<td>New North Florida Cooperative Association</td>
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ABSTRACT

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is one of the longest federally funded programs in the United States. The program is meant to provide food that is nutritious and affordable to schoolchildren. Indeed, most students receive free or a reduced price lunch emphasizing the importance of affordability and nutrition in the school lunch system. Since the creation of the NSLP in 1946 debates about food quality and nutrition standards have consumed school lunch reform discussions. Many health organizations stress the importance of child nutrition, and advocate for the means to prevent diseases such as childhood obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Often, these concerns are overshadowed by the federal government’s political priorities. This leads the government to make decisions based on costs and benefits rather than the stated goals of the program. This study analyzes five congressional hearings that occurred prior to the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act of 2004. By doing so, the interests of Congress as well as other competing organizations are realized. In addition, this study highlights public reactions and concerns toward children’s nutrition to identify their interests in relation to the federal government’s. The purpose of this study is not to determine how effective the NSLP has been, but to reveal how the program changed in an environment filled with competing interests.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

When one contemplates school reform, it’s unlikely one would think in terms of federally funded food and nutrition programs. More likely, one would think of school choice, standardized tests, or closing the achievement gap. Few people would consider the importance and value of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and yet this program has deep value and importance to the functionality of schools. Regrettably, school food is a forgotten topic in school reform discussions. Within the last 15-20 years, school lunch has gained significant attention from federal and state governments. While the NSLP has been enacted since 1946, government agencies have just begun to pay closer attention to the program’s impact on children’s health and wellbeing due to the emergence of the childhood obesity epidemic. The NSLP serves over 30 million children each year at a low rate or free of charge (“The National School Lunch Program”, n.d.). The National School Lunch Act (P.L. 113-79) explicitly declared this policy as a form of national security and it must “safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation’s children” (P.L.113-79, p.1). Not only was the policy supposed to protect children, but also support the consumption of agricultural commodities. The works of Janet Poppendieck (2010) and Susan Levine (2008) provide additional insight into the complexities of feeding programs in America. A frequently discussed topic in their work is nutrition, and the access to resources that provide proper nutrition for children. A compelling argument from Poppendieck (2010) was the difference between offered lunch, and served lunch. She explains schools can offer meals that
meet dietary guidelines, but that does not guarantee students are choosing these meals which influences the number of lunches served. Often, education researchers, social policy analysts, and policymakers have studied the importance of the school lunch program and students’ receptiveness to the program. Further, there are many notable studies that explain low-income and/or minority students’ dependence on this program. Yet, there continues to be a disconnect between the policy’s intent to “safeguard the nation’s children” and student receptiveness to the program. Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower (2011) argued that education researchers should pay closer attention to school food because it impacts our healthcare, agricultural, political, and economical systems. Inspired by this vision of the importance of school food programs, this study recounts five congressional hearings that led to the signing of the Healthy-Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 (HFFKA) on December 13th. The NSLP is ostensibly about providing meals to children to facilitate healthy habits, and yet an analysis of these key hearings is needed to uncover which stakeholders were represented during the hearings and whose interests where at the forefront. Before analyzing these hearings, it is necessary to summarize key events and contributors to the NSLP before and after the signing of the legislation in 1946.

**Overview of NSLP History**

Poverty was arguably the most influential issue that led to the United States developing the school lunch program. In the early 1900s, the United States was experiencing extreme destitution. During this time, New York City reported roughly 70,000 children arrived to school hungry (Spargo, 1969). Concern about financial hardship increased once Robert Hunter, a social reformer, wrote the book *Poverty* in 1904. Hunter argued that children were not able to focus on their lesson if they were coming to school hungry. Jennifer Geist Rutledge (2016) supported this claim in her analysis of the NSLP, and further argued that this connection established school
lunch as a charity program. Once activists were made aware of children living in poverty, food donations were given to schools from nonprofit organizations. Even though the federal government did not immediately act, state governments did and started to rely on nonprofit organizations to provide food for children (Gunderson, 2003). At this time, state governments showed deeper concern about—and motivation to resolve—the problem than the federal government. The federal government did not truly acknowledge the issue of food security until the late 1920s. Once the federal government began acknowledging the importance of feeding programs, another dimension was added to the conversation—nutrition.

Nutrition was frequently discussed throughout literature on school lunch. It explicitly stated in the National School Lunch Act (NSLA) that children should consume nutritious foods (Stallings & Yaktine, 2007). In the same document, it explained that in order for schools to qualify for federal reimbursement they must meet the established dietary guidelines reinforced by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The literature on the role of nutritionists does not fully address their intentions behind supporting the school lunch program but we do know that nutritionists gained a great deal of professional importance at the beginning of the early 1900s. Prior to the passing of the legislation, nutritionists argued that children needed a balanced diet in order to function properly in school. Many nutritionists in the 1900s were dedicated to solving issues of child malnutrition (Levine, 2011). For example, in 1916 nutritionists introduced the five food groups. They believed these food groups would provide parents, as well as state governments, with nutritious guidelines that would keep children healthy (Hunt, 1916). The involvement of nutritionists caused some to question their intentions behind supporting school lunch. As previously stated, roughly 70,000 children were coming to school hungry in the 1900s. Rutledge (2016) claimed nutritionists used school lunch as a way to
promote their research on malnutrition and gain professional respect from the medical community. Rutledge supported this statement by describing the increased interests of physicians on this issue. The collaboration of physicians and nutritionists changed the landscape of the NSLA, and explained the long-term reliance on nutritional standards.

Another argument on nutritional guidelines was food waste. This stems from the difference between offered lunch and served lunch. Poppendieck (2010) explained schools can offer meals that meet dietary guidelines, but that does not guarantee students are choosing these meals which influences the kinds of lunches served. This finding was based on data retrieved from School Nutrition Dietary Assessments in the early 1990s. Researchers concluded that there was a major gap between offered and served meals. As Poppendieck argued, this information continuously adds to the debates on proper nutritional guidelines (2010).

While nutritionists wanted to advocate for a balanced diet, they also needed to consider the availability of food and resources. Thus, the NSLP served as a way to combat malnutrition, and as an outlet for excess agricultural commodities. After the glaring effects of the Great Depression, the federal government was forced to address the impact of economic failure that catalyzed poverty and malnutrition (Rutledge, 2016). In the early 1930s, the federal government started providing financial year-to-year assistance to schools so they could acquire food for school lunch. This was largely due to the fact that excessive agricultural surplus negatively impacted the market price. In order to maintain surplus value in the market, the federal government gave schools funding to purchase commodities (Levine, 2011). Products such as wheat, pork, and dairy were available for purchase. Ultimately, the agriculture industry benefited from the increased profit and led to the formation of other organizations such as the Federal
Surplus Commodities Corporation. After the formation of this organization, more school lunch programs surfaced across the United States, and reportedly five million children were being served by 1940 (Rutledge, 2016).

Since 1940, the school lunch program has gradually transformed into a thriving business. Many historians agreed that limitations within the federal guidelines have led school service directors to seek other ways of obtaining revenue. For example, Poppendieck (2010) analyzed reimbursement programs and determined that schools are put in a position to break-even. Poppendieck defined break even as the total costs of federal commodities matching total revenue a school makes. As Rutledge (2016) discussed, nutritionists wanted children to have a balanced diet but this expectation became increasingly difficult to maintain due to pressure from other companies such as fast food and soda companies (Poppendieck, 2010). This battle between two worlds of business and health has shaped the controversial role of the NSLP. The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, officially signed into law in 2010, set nutritional standards on foods sold in schools. Afterwards, schools were able to sell foods that had minimal nutritional value through vending machines or in-school stores. The only requirement was that these foods not be sold in the lunchroom (Turner et al., 2012). The concern was that the vast majority of these foods contain high levels of fats, sugar, and calories, which are known to contribute to childhood obesity (Ogden et al., 2008). To compensate, many schools were attempting to sell foods in the lunchroom that were kid friendly such as, pizza, hamburgers, and sandwiches that meet USDA guidelines. However, these items could not be sold everyday which led many students to rely on vending machines for food consumption because its more appetizing (Competitive Foods in School, 2005).
The Institute of Medicine is responsible for reporting un-biased information about trends in medicine. Their archived reports show that children in the United States struggle with obesity at alarming rates. The issue of childhood obesity has been growing since the late 1950’s, which parallels the period fast food started to gain popularity (Levenstein, 1993). The Public Health Research, Practice, and Policy Journal published an article in 2008 stating that the U.S was facing an epidemic (McCarthy et al, 2008). The data released on childhood obesity has driven the conversation toward the effectiveness of the school lunch program. Former First Lady Michelle Obama increased awareness around childhood obesity and ways schools could address this issue. She created the “Let’s Move Campaign” which explicitly outlined ways for schools to promote healthier lifestyles and encouraged healthier options in the lunchroom (“Let’s Move”, 2010). Activists and researchers who supported this campaign strongly believed schools were in the perfect position to reverse obesity rates by developing school-based policies, health programs, and encouraging physical activity (Story et al., 2009). The desire to connect health recommendations and the school lunch program was a clear objective during the Obama administration. Another layer to this conversation is the issue of racial healthy disparities. Reportedly, black and brown children are more likely to have higher obesity rates, as well as other diseases/conditions, than their white counterparts (McCarthy et al, 2008). The role of the NSLP in addressing this issue falls into two arguments. Some researchers believed this is an issue of socioeconomic status, which determines a child’s regular food options. This means schools are not capable of impacting a child’s health through the school lunch program because it is a larger issue (McCarthy et al, 2008; Paris, 2014). The second argument is schools and the food services departments need to be more cognizant of their student body, so they do not exacerbate serious health conditions (Poppendieck, 2010).
As the literature revealed, the NSLP attracted different interest groups who have proven to have considerable impact on the landscape of the policy and the quality of foods in schools. Anti-hunger activists, nutrition education, agriculture and business industries benefit from the NSLP in different ways. Weaver-Hightower (2011) stated in his research that politics was an area that needed more investigation because of its high impact. The overall literature on school lunch lacks strong evidence on the impact of interest groups during the development phase of policies. With that, this study analyzed key interest groups that influenced Congress to make “monumental” changes to the NSLP. This study did not evaluate the effectiveness of the program because significant literature on this issue already exists. Taking this approach, this study sought to reveal how various interests groups insert their ideals into policy decisions, along with uncovering which stakeholders are not represented in the congressional hearings.

The Interest Groups

The five congressional hearings served as a platform for multiple agencies to address their concerns. Those giving testimonies represented university professors, researchers, members of National Association of School Nurses, school nutrition directors, food policy groups, early childhood groups, members of National School Boards Association, members of National Parent Teacher Association, dairy companies, beverage companies, farming associations, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, foundations, and insurance companies. These hearings took place between December 2008 and July 2010. Representatives were grouped according to their interests as they related to hearing topics. The first congressional hearing occurred on December 8, 2008 just before President Barack Obama was sworn into office. This hearing consisted of Dr. Mariana Chilton, a professor and researcher; Carolyn Duff, a school nurse and a member of the National Association of School Nurses; Mary Kay Fox, a senior researcher at a research
organization; and Eileen Kennedy, a dean of nutrition at a university. Congress selected these individuals to provide insight on children’s health and food assistance programs in the midst of an economic crisis. The second congressional hearing was held on March 4, 2009. The panelists for this hearing were Susan Bartlett, a senior associate for a research consulting agency; Connie Boldt, a school food director in Iowa; Katie Wilson, a school nutrition director in Wisconsin; Kenneth Hecht, an executive director for a California based food policy agency; Lucy Nolan, an executive director of an anti-hunger group; and Dr. David Paige, a professor. These panelists discussed how to improve nutrition for children in the midst of a financial deficit.

The third hearing occurred on March 31, 2009. Panelists included Pat Cooper, a president for an early childhood organization; Reginald Felton, the director of National School Boards Association; Byron Garrett, the chief executive officer of the National Parent Teacher Association; Nancy Heugnergart, a director of a healthy eating alliance; Miriam Brown, the chief executive director of a dairy company; Karen Ehrens, a chairman on a dietetic association; Hank Izzo, the vice president of Mars Snackfood; and Susan Neely, the president and executive director of the American Beverage Association. Panelists shared their perspectives on reforming nutrition for children outside of federal programs. The fourth hearing was held on May 15, 2009. The panelists consisted of William Dietz, a director in the nutrition division at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); Glyen Holmes, a creator a Florida based farming association; Cindy Satcher, a director for child nutrition programs with USDA; and David Satcher, a director for a health disparities organization. These panelists were selected to explain the benefits of farm-to-school projects. The final hearing took place on July 1, 2010. The panelists were Tom Colicchio, a chef and restaurateur; Paul Monroe, a major general in the U.S. Army; Robert Rector, a senior research fellow for a foundation; Eduardo Sanchez, vice president
and chief medical officer for Blue Cross and Blue Shield in Texas; Honorary Thomas Vilsack, the secretary of the USDA; and James Weill, the president for Food Research and Action Center. These individuals were selected to declare their approval of improving the Child Nutrition Act Reauthorization.

These key hearings occurred during President Obama’s administration with the exception of the first hearing. The interests of these individuals and their organizations in relation to the Obama administration’s policy interests, specifically in healthcare, helped to shape the changes made to the NSLP. The Child Nutrition Act is eligible for reauthorization every four years, and this administration’s reauthorization was believed to have been monumental for its administrative and operational changes.

Methodology

This study was a historical analysis of the NSLP during 2008 to 2017, which largely occurred during President Obama’s administration. In comparison to previous administrations, the Obama administration aggressively emphasized health and nutrition in schools, as well as in communities. With that, its necessary to assess how his political agenda and Congress’ agenda influenced changes to the NSLP guidelines. The empirical sources used for this analysis consist of governmental publications, specifically, five congressional hearings held in Congress that led to the signing of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. The purpose for using congressional hearings was to uncover common and opposing interests between panelists and Congress, as well as missing/underrepresented voices. Another governmental publication included President Obama’s State of the Union Address in 2010. The purpose of analyzing this document was to identify his agenda and interests as they relate to Congress and the American
people. The texts for all governmental publications were analyzed through word choice, repetitive language, framing of topics and sentences, and questioning of chosen policy topics.

In addition, press releases from The White House and United States Department of Agriculture, magazine articles, newspaper articles, and journal articles were utilized to corroborate or refute claims made in congressional hearings. Lastly, a report released from the Congressional Research Service (CRS) department was used in the discussion to highlight policy changes, address concerns of transparency, and reveal the impact of certain interest groups. In addition, this document was used to emphasize the deeper concerns of Congress compared to the concerns expressed in congressional hearings. The students and families most impacted by the Child Nutrition Act Reauthorization were heavily referenced but were not self-represented in the developmental process for this policy. The following chapters analyzed these key documents to explain why there continues to be a disconnect between policy changes and student receptiveness toward feeding programs.
CHAPTER TWO

SENATE CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

This chapter examined how the impact of the economic crisis between 2007 and 2008 resulted in more students participating in the school lunch program, as well as the four congressional hearings in the Senate. Nationwide, news reports began to surface, in the latter part of 2008, addressing the program’s funding concerns. Many school districts noticed a drastic increase in the number of students participating in the lunch program and their inability to financially support this increase. In December 2008, the School Nutrition Association released a report stating that schools nationwide were serving 425,000 more school lunches than last year. Not only were more students participating in the program, but also more were qualifying for subsidized meals (Moran, 2008). The economic crisis placed immense pressure on school districts to combat this problem. At this time, the only option school districts had to increase revenue was to increase the price of school lunch for paying students. Many school districts in South Carolina contemplated this decision which could help combat the food service department’s loss of roughly $1,000,000 over two years (Cetrone, 2008). In California, a school district requested an additional $31 million to sustain this rise in student participation but did not receive funding due to an impending budget deficit (Chalk, 2008). In fact, the state’s former superintendent of public instruction, Jack O’Connell, made a bold statement by saying that California was likely to run out of school lunch funding one month before the school year ended (Moran, 2008). The poor financial situation impacted more than the just the functionality of schools, but also family dynamics. Many middle-class families who did not depend on the NSLP
started enrolling their children in the program. The social impact of middle-income students joining the program was huge because it removed the stigma of only low-income students participating in the program. With this significant change in population, the program was no longer a program for low-income students. It was quickly becoming a program for all students. These concerns from school districts ignited the first congressional hearing and reinforced the importance of the NSLP.

**First Hearing**

The first congressional hearing on school lunch took place on December 8, 2008. Within each testimony there was mention of food insecurity. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity as “having limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (Grilo et al, 2015). The hearing was titled *Promoting Health, Preventing Chronic Disease, and Fighting Hunger* so; it is no surprise food insecurity was frequently referenced. While this was the chosen topic, the vast majority of concerns from the public focused on school districts’ inability to finance their school lunch program not disease prevention. Congressmen and women spoke at the hearing to address the importance of healthy children and its impact on the healthcare system. Senator Tom Harkin, Chairman of committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, initiated this conversation by clarifying that the hearings were not solely about child nutrition, but “is the debate, that this Congress will have and this new President will have on fundamentally reforming the healthcare system of America” (Promoting Health, Preventing Chronic Disease, and Fighting Hunger, 2008, p.1). He boldly stated “we don’t have a health care system in America, we have a sick care system” (Promoting Health, Preventing Chronic Disease, and Fighting Hunger, 2008, p.1-2). Again, Congress was concerned with a larger domestic policy
issue, and most panelists were more concerned with ways to improve funding and program efficiency. Panelists’ concerns more accurately reflected situations school districts were facing across the country. This is not to suggest that Congress was not interested in the problems school districts were experiencing, rather it revealed that their interests differed from the panelists and the public. This has the potential to dictate the changes made to the Child Nutrition Act. Wisely, many panelists tailored their testimonies to the needs of Congress as a way to add relevancy to their recommendations. For example, Eileen Kennedy, Dean of Nutrition Policy and Science at Tufts University, spoke about a “double burden disease.” Essentially, the United States was battling a food security issue while simultaneously facing an obesity epidemic (Promoting Health, Preventing Chronic Disease, and Fighting Hunger, 2008, p.7). Kennedy focused on promoting healthier lifestyles, and showcased her work with Shape Up Somerville. Shape Up Somerville was a local project in a small city outside of Boston, MA. The project was supported by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as well city officials, and community members (Hall, 2011). The basis of this project was investing in the health and wellbeing of a community prepares individuals to lead healthier lifestyles that eliminate concerns of food security and obesity. Here, Kennedy suggested funding was needed to properly safeguard children while also appealing to Harkin’s position on healthcare reform. Both believed that prioritizing prevention over treatment reduces funding concerns, more importantly, supports healthcare reform agendas.

Another panelist, Dr. Mariana Chilton, shared her concerns and recommendations to the committee with regards to healthcare reform. Dr. Chilton’s work for Children’s Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program and in Drexel University’s Department of Health Management and Policy emphasized her commitment to prevent hunger and nutrition-related diseases, which
were the focal points of her testimony. Dr. Chilton asserted the Child Nutrition Act Reauthorization must include changes that reflect these concerns. In addition, she suggested a universal school lunch program be made applicable to inner city schools that have high rates of low-income students. Dr. Chilton’s emphasis on nutrition directly aligned with prevention. She stated, “an investment in child care without similar widespread attention to nutrition ultimately wastes [quality child care]” (Promoting Health, Preventing Chronic Disease, and Fighting Hunger, 2008, p.13). This was a statement to Congress that nutrition must be at the center of the policy changes. As Sen. Harkin stated earlier in the hearing, childhood obesity, heart disease, and diabetes can be prevented with a commitment to healthy lifestyles. From his perspective, healthcare reform should focus on ways to prevent these diseases instead of treatment of diseases. It was clear from Dr. Chilton’s speech that she agreed with his stance.

Following this hearing, it is important to note, newspapers shifted attention away from financial challenges to the importance of healthy habits. By shifting attention from financial accountability to healthy habits, the conversation started to target personal options and choices rather than a government mandate to provide a stronger NSLP. One must recognize that healthy food choices flow from sufficient funding. In Wisconsin, The Capital Times published an article describing the food quality at schools, and called the food “horrible” (Krome, 2008, p.1). There were many articles making similar claims, but they failed to mention that poor food quality is often related to a school district’s funding shortages. California, the state that was concerned about not being able to finance their lunch program for an entire school year, publicized a story about a student from a school in Los Angeles who received a $400,000 grant to fight childhood obesity in their respective school. The student was quoted saying “I was eating a lot of junk food” (Day, 2008, p.1). This is not to say that promoting healthy habits was bad press, but it
revealed how quickly the dialogue changed when the federal government was involved. More importantly, this student was sponsored by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which had awarded ten other communities with grants that year (Day, 2008). As previously stated in chapter one, the federal government has historically been slow to supply adequate funding for the NSLP. In the 1900s, non-profit organizations provided school lunches for students before a federal mandate was established (Gunderson, 2003). In 2008, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation acted before the federal government. In these economic times, it was clear the federal government did not tend to the financial stress school food departments were experiencing nor did they properly safeguard the nation’s children from preventable diseases.

**March Hearings**

Again, Senator Harkin underscored and promoted a major domestic policy—healthcare. He directly reiterated to the panel, as he did in the first hearing, that the larger concern was reforming the healthcare system. His commitment to highlighting this point made it seem as if he was only partly interested in the testimonies from panelist. The title of the second hearing was *Improving Nutrition for American’s Children in Difficult Times* and occurred on March 4, 2009. The title implies nutrition was the problem, but its access to quality nutrition that was the problem. Quality nutrition is only accessible through adequate funding. Senators briefly acknowledged the difficult economic times, but deferred to panelists to expand on this issue. The first panelist testimony came from Katie Wilson, a school nutrition director in Wisconsin. She took this opportunity to discuss the need for an updated federal reimbursement rate. She did not make claims that nutrition needed improving, but rather access to quality nutrition needed improvement.
Panelists attempted to shift the conversation in this hearing to administrative costs, indirect costs, and incentives for schools. Unlike the first congressional hearing, the vast majority of these panelists worked directly with schools to provide proper nutrition. More importantly, the panelists at this hearing represented different interest groups that lobbied for different policy changes. The second panelist to speak was Susan Bartlett, a senior associate at Abt Associates. Abt Associates is a research agency that works to improve economic conditions for various communities globally. It was stated in her testimony that Abt Associates was under contract with the Food and Nutrition Service within the Department of Agriculture. It is not uncommon for the federal government to contract to organizations. In fact, it’s publicized on governmental websites, which outline ways to complete applications and qualify (USDA, n.d.). It is important to note that the federal government chooses projects or studies that correlate to issues that are a priority from their perspective (USDA, n.d.). In this case, Bartlett’s study was a cost analysis, and during a time of severe economic stress it made sense for the federal government to invest in this topic. But, the placement of this study in the second hearing was questionable. Congress welcomed testimonies on financing the NSLP, but members continued to pursue nutrition related topics. Arguably, funding research that reflects the needs of the federal government does not guarantee that schools struggling financially will benefit from this research. Given the state of the economy, this was largely because the federal government’s strategy was to conserve finances.

Attention to federal spending was on full display in this hearing. For example, Wilson shared her experiences as a school nutrition director which were opposite of Bartlett’s report. Chairman Harkin noticed a difference in explanations and questioned both panelists with regard to federal dollars being used for a la carte services. Bartlett reported that some school nutrition
directors were using federal subsidies to support their a la carte services. This would be an unlawful act. To dispel any hint of unlawful acts, Wilson explained that was very unlikely because directors have to maintain detailed records of how funds were allocated. Further, she explained that directors use revenue from a la carte services to further support the breakfast and lunch programs. Whether this was the case is not the issue, but rather how quickly the narrative can change based on whose perspective is being represented. This example reiterates the point of this study and supports the claim that the NSLP was restructured in the midst of competing interests.

In the process of discussing best practices and strategies to improve the school lunch program, the federal government has to consider whose demands or interests are more valuable. It was apparent the committee was aware of the competing interest groups when it chose a panel of different stakeholders. For example, Lucy Nolan expressed interest in supporting after-school and summer nutrition programs. Her perspective comes from an anti-hunger outlook, and therefore her testimony was shaped around addressing this issue. She recommended Congress create a “whole program” because it would guarantee children access to food and would be economically beneficial. Using this perspective, implementation of such program would require students to be engaged in school year-round in some capacity in order to benefit from nutritional programs. This is likely to present additional problems for school nutritional directors, like Wilson, who struggled to finance two programs—breakfast and lunch. Congress cannot simply ignore an imperative to end hunger, and it cannot make policy to benefit the interest of one over the other. It must wrestle with both issues—hunger and the school nutrition program.

The third congressional hearing was held on March 31, 2009 and was possibly the most important in terms of identifying different interest groups. In this hearing, organizations such as
American Beverage Association, American Dietetic Association, National Parent Teacher Association, National School Board Association, dairy industry, and food manufacturers were represented. These groups each had their own agenda, and while children’s health was important in schools, child consumption was more important to the longevity of their business.

A prime example of this was the American Beverage Association. Susan Neely, President and Chief Executive Officer of the organization, explained that their company would seek to create healthier beverages for children. Around the same time of the hearing, Rep. Peggy Pendleton and Rep. Bruce Bickford requested that the USDA prohibit consumers to use food stamps for soft drinks (“Soda and Health”, 2009). The food stamp program is a component of the Child Nutrition Act and the push to eliminate unhealthy beverages from this program can easily spread to other programs. Neely took the opportunity in the hearing to stress that healthy beverages can be served to children in school. Neely advocated for her organization by reporting their beverages contained 58 percent less calories than in previous years. By including the beverage association in the hearing, it was possible Congress recognized its inability to eliminate popular beverages from schools, and instead chose to limit its involvement.

However, in order to analyze this decision more accurately Congress invited Karen Ehrens to speak. Ehrens’ work focused on diabetes and was associated with the American Dietetic Association. The theme of her speech was requesting the USDA create stricter guidelines on all foods sold in schools. Her commitment to diabetes prevention and addressing unhealthy foods in schools allowed Congress to gauge the need for beverages in schools. Regarding the policy on all foods sold in schools, she said “[t]his is a 30 year old policy that doesn’t make sense anymore” (Beyond Federal School Meal Programs, 2009, p.32). While this statement addressed all foods and not just beverages, it still placed pressure on Congress to
question the benefits of a calorie-reduced beverage. Smartly, Ehrens related this issue back to Chairman Harkin’s concern for healthcare reform. From her perspective, continued access of unhealthy options in schools contributes to the development of chronic diseases, which ultimately impacts the healthcare system. Panelists’ constant insertion of healthcare revealed their support for healthcare reform, and their efforts to gain support on their issues from Congress.

Following the two congressional hearings in March, Senator Tom Harkin introduced a bill into the Senate to amend the Child Nutrition Act of 1966. This amendment sought to improve the nutrition and health of students and protect the federal government’s financial decisions regarding all foods sold in schools. Harkin was the chairman in the first three hearings, and made it clear that improving child nutrition helped improve the country’s healthcare system. This bill was co-sponsored by 30 members, and seven of them served on the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry. These members include Patrick Leachy, Blanche Lincoln, Sherrod Brown, Robert Casey Jr., Amy Klobuchar, Kirsten Gillibrand, Michael Bennet and all of whom were present during the first three hearings as well (Proquest, 2009). His commitment to refining the Child Nutrition Act was apparent, but it is even more apparent that he was interested in improving the healthcare system. Harkin made a statement on December 13, 2009 saying, “Today and every day, an estimated 14,000 Americans will lose their health insurance coverage” (Jacobson, 2009) during a floor speech. This statement was commonly used in the Democratic Party, most famously said by President Obama. Harkin’s repetition of this statement showed his ties to the Democratic Party agenda. With that, it is clear his political connections influenced the conversations in the congressional hearings, as he served as Chairman. On many instances during the second congressional hearing, Chairman Harkin questioned panelists about
administrative costs, ways schools could operate in a budget, and preventing health related
diseases. He stressed the importance of school districts following dietary guidelines for lunch
and breakfast in order to prevent diseases such as heart disease. It is evident that it was a priority
of the Chairman’s to incorporate healthcare reform into the conversations. This is important to
address because it highlights how quickly party interests can control conversations around policy
changes.

“**Its really a two-for, if not more**”

As the conversation around nutritional standards continued, another factor was
introduced during the fourth congressional hearing on May 15, 2009. This time the conversation
focused on farm-to-school projects. As usual, Chairman Harkin spoke before the panelists’
testimonies to set the stage for the discussion. From his perspective, supporting farm-to-school
projects were “…really a two-for, if not more” (Benefits of Farm-to-School, 2009, p.4). Chapter
one discussed the important role agriculture played in enacting the NSLP in 1946. Its reoccurring
role in the 2008 reauthorization was a testament to its level of importance to the federal
government. This brief comment defined this congressional hearing because it revealed how the
agriculture industry benefits from collaborating with school food services. In this case, farm-to-
school projects gave students access to fresh produce that contained high quality nutrients and
were appetizing while simultaneously improving the economic conditions for rural communities
that relied heavily on farming as their main source of income (Benefits of Farm-to-School, 2009,
p.7). Chairman Harkin reiterated this, and it was apparent that he was in full support of this
partnership. Prior to this hearing, the USDA Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsak released a
statement on March 26, 2009 that promised 200 million pounds of nonfat dry milk would be
used in feeding programs. Vilsak acknowledged that this would help low-income families who
struggled to provide food for their children. In addition, he said “[a]t the same time, USDA's disposal plan will benefit dairy farmers, who have seen markets disappear and prices plummet in recent months, by increasing consumption of milk and other dairy products” (Agriculture Department Documents and Publications, 2009). While it appeared the federal government and USDA was focused on improving business for farmers, some panelists redirected their focus on improving communities.

David Satcher, the director of Center of Excellence on Health Disparities, took his allotted time to share stories of low-income and/or minority children who struggled with obesity and undernourishment. He stated that schools were the perfect “equalizer” because they had the potential to remain constant from child to child with proper federal support. He spoke of wellness policies and how they were inconsistent from school district to district and state-to-state. This presented a problem because some children were being exposed to varied forms of physical activity and quality foods. Perhaps the most memorable part of his speech was his statement that obesity and undernourishment were bigger issues than healthcare reform. In comparison, Chairman Harkin spoke of healthcare reform as if it was the biggest issue, so this comment potentially influenced his receptiveness from Congress. It is not shocking that Satcher took this approach because of his connection to grassroots organizations. In an article titled “Advocacy for vulnerable patients” the authors stated that grassroots organizations access their power through narratives to advocate for vulnerable populations (Christopher et al, 2011). By this definition, Satcher seemingly took this approach in order to demand better federal and state policies that support low-income and/or minority children. His testimony added another layer to the conversation that was not mentioned in prior hearings. If few testimonies such as Satcher’s were represented in this reauthorization process then it is unlikely the concerns of vulnerable
populations were fully addressed.

Another panelist, Glyn Holmes, took his opportunity to share stories of how farm-to-school projects benefited his organization. Holmes formerly worked at the USDA and represented the New North Florida Cooperative Association (NNFC) as well as the Farm-to-School Network. NNFC is responsible for connecting small farmers with school districts to provide cost-effective and nutritious foods. Farm Aid, a popular farming organization, wrote a cover story about Holmes journey to supporting small farmers, and since, he has been one the most successful African-American farmers (“Glyen Holmes”, 2010). His work was displayed in the Farmer Heroes section on the Farm Aid website. His alliance to a federal agency and well-established organizations allowed his testimony to have more of an impact. While he did not speak on the importance of supporting low-income, minority children, it was shown in his work. Instead, he chose to share how the USDA benefited from utilizing small farmers to supply produce to schools. With this approach, he was more likely to appeal to Congress compared to Satcher’s because he explained how it was a “two-for.”

The process of combining two industries—agriculture and education—proved to be a challenging task because of the varied interests. The Agriculture industry was one of the main reasons the school lunch program was created in 1946 (Levine, 2008). Thus, it is no surprise that in 2009 agriculture was still a major part of the reauthorization. Chairman Harkin repeatedly stated that healthcare reform was the ultimate goal, but in this hearing it appeared that agriculture was another priority as well. These four hearings delayed the reauthorization process by a year, and school lunch continued to be a concern for many families and students. The events following these hearings helped to persuade the public that progress was being made. President Obama’s
first State of Union Address in 2010 set forth policy initiatives that were similar to Congress, and his focus was healthcare and agriculture.
CHAPTER THREE
THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT’S RESPONSE

This chapter seeks to analyze the State of the Union Address (SOTU) in 2010 to understand the President’s policy objectives. The analysis focuses on President Obama’s delivery and conceptual framework. In addition, this chapter recounts the reaction to Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move Campaign, which was a major commercial success. Lastly, the final hearing is analyzed in this section because of its close proximity to the former events. In 2010, there was significant progress in reshaping the Child Nutrition Act, and attempts by the federal government to be transparent with the public about the progress. This section is positioned as the federal government’s response to the hearings in the Senate as well as the economic stress impacting the American people.

State of the Union Address 2010

In President Barak Obama’s first State of the Union address in 2010, he took roughly 70 minutes to persuade Congress to support his plans, and encourage the American people to maintain hope and believe in change. At this time, the President had been in office for one year, and acted “immediately and aggressively” to ease the struggles the economy was causing the American people. One word accurately describes his speech: regulation. Every proposal presented was followed with plans for more regulation. Moreover, it is typical of democrats to advocate for more federal government regulation (Winders, 2009, p. 77). This fundamentally changed the landscape of his speech and gave society a glimpse into his governing style moving forward. For example, in the Bush administration a financial rescue program was created in order
to stabilize markets as needed. Once President Obama took office the markets were already in flux, so he decided to continue with this same rescue program but charged the “biggest banks” a fee in order to hold them accountable. This decision was not popular on Wall Street (8:40), however President Obama justified this form of regulation by implying it would lead to more stable jobs for working class citizens, small business would benefit, and the economy would improve. In fact, this theme of introducing a proposal and then alleviating the crowd reaction with an appeal to middle-class citizens is apparent throughout his entire speech.

This strategy caused the speech to feel personal and relevant. The repetitive usage of “we” frames the speech as a call for unity. This literary tactic has the potential to create warmth, and encourage American citizens to consider the possibility of working together to create change. President Obama’s speech relied heavily on a pathos style of writing in order to elicit emotional responses. For example, he shared stories of children sending him letters who were willing to give their allowance to the people of Haiti (1:08:25), or children expressing their concern for their parents’ chances of working again (3:32). Sharing these stories has the ability to elicit common reactions from viewers, which reinforces a theme of togetherness. He even reiterated this theme while discussing sensitive topics such as a decrease in unemployment, healthcare reform, clean energy initiatives, tax breaks for middle class, and affordable higher education. Again, extending the federal government’s involvement is commonplace for Democratic presidents. The more important aspect of these propositions was his delivery. He frames each as only achievable through a collective effort. Not only was he calling for unity among the American people but also within Congress. Arguably—in these moments—it appeared he was asking for bipartisanship. Frequently, throughout his speech he complimented the House of Representatives for supporting his causes, but urged the Senate to consider
supporting (The Obama White House, 2010). Perhaps, this was because the Democrats had recently lost the supermajority and he understood that his bills would be challenging to pass if he did not have Republican support (Cooper, 2010). In addition, he was indirectly letting the American people know the odds were not in his favor.

He did not blatantly blame any one person or group for the economic crisis in 2008, but he did imply the federal government lost the trust of the American people in the prior administration. For example he stated, “we face a deficit of trust” and continued to say the “credibility gap” needs closing (45:29). Arguably, this was a subtle attack on the previous administration, and an indication of the changes he planned to make moving forward. In fact, following his speech he participated in a live interview that was broadcast over YouTube regarding the hot topics from his speech (Superville, 2010). This type of interview was the first in presidential history, and a conscious effort to be more transparent. The White House released a statement saying the decision to do this was to be more transparent with the public and increase the federal governments level of interaction with citizens (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2010). It was evident from his speech and interview that the most concerning and controversial issue on his agenda was the healthcare bill.

Leading up to the SOTU address, there were many conversations surrounding the Democratic Party’s ability to maintain supermajority in the Senate. The supermajority consists of 60 votes, which is very useful in case of a filibuster (Cooper, 2010). On January 19, 2010 a mid-term election was held for the U.S. Senate due to a vacancy in Massachusetts. Edward M. Kennedy (D) who was a longtime advocate for healthcare formally held the seat (Cooper, 2010). The election resulted in the Republicans eliminating the supermajority. The Washington Post and NY Times issued articles claiming the Democratic Party was “scrambling” to push forward a very
controversial healthcare bill. Unsurprisingly, President Obama’s healthcare bill was stalled. At the time of the SOTU address, the Republicans occupied 41 seats in the Senate (Kane and Vick, 2010). These sudden changes to Congress further explain the President’s emphasis on bipartisanship. During his speech, he addressed the healthcare bill after his proposal for affordable higher education (31:19). This is important because it was likely an attempt to gain support from a younger audience.

President Obama centered his demand for healthcare reform on reducing the financial deficit and protecting middle-class Americans. He immediately acknowledged that this issue was controversial, but emphasized he was working to “[bring] more security to the lives of so many Americans” (33:50). Once he finished addressing the public, he explained his healthcare bill would help reduce the deficit that had reached $1 trillion dollars. While these are realistic concerns, they did not fully explain the President’s true motives for pursuing healthcare reform.

Another interesting aspect of his healthcare speech was his brief insertion of childhood obesity (34:21). This was an initiative that was spearheaded by First Lady Michelle Obama, and was directly linked to the NSLP. In February of 2010, Michelle Obama announced the launch of the Let’s Move Campaign publicly. She received major support from newly appointed Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack. Later, Vilsack gained autonomy to create school lunch guidelines under the USDA (The White House, 2010). In a press release from the White House, Mrs. Obama demanded children receive healthy food options instead of “high-priced, low-quality foods” (The White House, 2010). The implication was that funding was not being used properly on school foods. During her speech she included four parts that were essential to ending the childhood obesity epidemic in a generation. The first part of her speech addressed including ingredient labels on food products, so parents could identify the correct foods for their children.
Secondly, she called for healthier food options for schools. She believed this could only be accomplished with the help of food suppliers, food service workers, school officials, and a large investment of over a billion dollars. Thirdly, she encouraged parents, communities, and schools to motivate their children to be physically active daily. Lastly, she requested families have access to “affordable” and healthy food options in their communities (The White House, 2010). Unlike the SOTU address, Mrs. Obama directed her efforts to families and those who worked with children daily. By doing this, the portrayal of the Let’s Move Campaign became a movement for the people not politics.

Nevertheless, the economic impact of obesity did not go unnoticed. In 2008, the United States spent $147 billion in healthcare on obesity (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). President Obama’s support for ending obesity can be linked to his desire to alleviate costs as they related to his healthcare bill. Further, his intentions could stem from the fact that food services employed twenty percent of the workforce in the United States in 2008. Of that twenty percent, schools were the main employer. This percentage equates to $1 trillion each year (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). With that, these two motives aligned with his plans to improve employment rates and healthcare reform.

Analyzing President Obama’s plans to reduce unemployment rates, push healthcare reform, and lower taxes for the middle-class helped to identify his major concerns. While school lunch and nutrition were not explicitly discussed in his speech, these two areas received significant attention throughout his presidency. This can be attributed to its important role in furthering his agenda.
The Final Hearing

The final hearing took place on July 1, 2010 several months after President Obama’s 2010 State of the Union address and the launch of the Let’s Move Campaign. This hearing was held in the House, whereas the other hearings were held in the Senate. This shows the progression of the reauthorization, and also how challenging it was for Congress to agree on policy changes. The main contributor to this hearing was Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsak. He spoke candidly about the importance of passing this bill in the House and believed Congress “have an opportunity with this bill to also provide consistency in terms of the nutritional opportunities at schools” (Improving Nutrition for America’s Children Act, 2010, p.7). He used the word “youngsters” repeatedly when referring to children. This served as a way to highlight his commitment to the issue. Surprisingly, he did not mention any funding concerns, but instead stressed how dependent many children were on the NSLP.

While his testimony was thoughtful, it seemed to be more of a formality. He did not introduce any new information. In fact, his testimony reiterated comments made in previous hearings by other Senators. The dynamic of the hearing shifted once other panelists shared their testimonies. All the testimonies explicitly stated their position on this bill and whether or not a reauthorization was worth the financial investment. For example, Robert Rector spoke on behalf of The Heritage Foundation as a senior researcher. Rector claimed that there was not enough evidence proving students’ health improved from school breakfast and lunch. Because of this, Rector felt it was “irresponsible” to demand more funding when the evidence was not substantial.

Even though there were panelists who disagreed with proposed policy changes, other researchers supported the Senate’s efforts to push for improvements. James Weill served as the
President of Food Research & Action Center and stated, “these programs are among the very best public investments that this nation has” (Improving Nutrition for America’s Children Act, 2010, p.53). With Michelle Obama bringing commercial awareness to obesity, nutrition and physical activity, the House was in a position to make a decision that benefits all children. Overall, more panelists vocalized their support for the bill than those who did not. The bill was passed out of the House, and was signed into legislation at the end of the year. The aftermath of the bill echoes my concerns about competing interests shaping policy changes.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE PUBLIC RESPONSE

Throughout the hearings, families and students were not present to voice their concerns. Rather their concerns were expressed through the works of researchers, professors, and other business groups. In this section, a notable Congressional Research Service (CRS) report is referenced to identify key changes to the policy, and identify whose interests were included in the changes. With that, this section recounts the reactions from multiple students and school food directors after the HHFKA was implemented in 2012.

Offsets and Policy Changes

Following the signing of the Healthy-Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA), the CRS released a report detailing the legislative history of the bill. This report comes exactly ten days after President Obama signed HHFKA on December 13, 2010. The journey to passing the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act was challenging and required many proposal amendments by the Senate and House. CRS is responsible for relaying analytical reports to Congress with regards to bills and policies. Joe Richardson who investigated the changes and lingering concerns of the HHFKA conducted this specific report.

The Obama administration proposed funding the new program with $10 billion for 10 years. This amount eventually decreased to $4.5 billion over 10 years (Richardson, 2010). Richardson’s financial description of the bill reinforced Congress’ federal spending concerns that were indirectly mentioned in the congressional hearings. In order to pass the legislation there were four “offsets”. The first two, changes to bonus commodities operations and additional
review of independent eligibility for free and reduced lunch, did not encounter controversy. However, the other two, reduced payments for the Environmental Quality Incentive Program and reduced nutrition spending for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program received significant opposition. During the congressional hearings there was no mention of how funds were to be allocated for the HHFKA. Congress had an opportunity in the second hearing to discuss funding allocation, but instead focused their attention on improving nutrition. To omit a discussion on funding suggests Congress was unaware of any “offsets” or panelists were purposefully excluded from this information.

The report acknowledged that child nutrition programs and Women, Infant, and Children programs were expected to receive review in 2009, but were delayed due to concerns about funding. The bill proposed by the House was not passed because of its far-reaching demands, but the Senate passed the reauthorization with new adaptations. Richardson addressed not only the cost controversy, but also policy concerns. The first concern was with regards to the federal governments involvement in deciding the types of foods served in schools outside of the meal programs (vending machines, a la carte). In the third hearing, there was significant conversation surrounding the types of foods served in schools. Congress expressed serious interests in healthier options because it would alleviate healthcare costs long-term. Expectedly, this was listed as a policy concern in Richardson’s report that can be attributed to the controversy over healthcare reform. The second concern was geared toward federal rules requiring non-free and reduced lunch students to pay a minimum price. These were considered major issues within Congress. Aside from policy concerns, the changes to the Child Nutrition Act focused on operations.
The operational changes that received the most attention were federal funding for school lunches, expanded access to meals, and inclusion of nutrition/wellness policies. In terms of funding and pricing of school lunches, changes were made to Section 201 and 205. After revisions, section 201 stated that schools receive an increase in funding on a performance basis. This means schools must follow nutritional standards to qualify for a bonus. Section 205 stated that schools have to gradually increase the price of lunches for paying students in order to balance the federal subsidy received for free/reduced lunches (Richardson, 2010). The second major change expanded access to free meals. This involved streamlining the direct certification process as a way to reduce administrative costs. Also, schools that operated under Provisions 2 and 3 were required to complete a base year application in order to determine the amount of federal subsidy needed for four years. Lastly, schools were expected to follow the recommendations from the National Academy of Science and set minimal nutritional standards for “competitive foods” (Richardson, 2010). This portion of Richardson’s report was heavily discussed in the congressional hearings. Many panelists focused on operational changes in the first and second hearing, which was very important to Congress. Interestingly, there was no mention of equipping communities with resources to combat health conditions/diseases, nor was there mention of concerns for student receptiveness in the report. It is clear the policy changes improved the functionality of school food departments, but not necessarily the health and well being of children.

Mrs. Obama and other governmental officials celebrated the HHFKA as a way to publicly gain excitement for the new bill. On December 2, 2010, Mrs. Obama released a statement expressing her support for the passing of HHFKA. She gave her gratitude to parents, educators, and government officials for supporting this bill, and standing with her to fight
childhood obesity. On the day of the signing, December 13, 2010, the Office of the Press Secretary released statements from multiple government officials expressing their support for the legislation. With all the public exposure for the legislation, the policy lacked transparency. The press releases do not reveal specific policy changes, nor discuss funding controversies. The continuous debate over funding has left many unanswered questions regarding ways to combat health disparities, food quality, and student receptiveness. There were a lot of competing groups that played a role in shaping the outcome of this bill, and it is important that students and families be included in this process to guarantee their needs are met.

Is School Food Better?

The HHFKA was officially implemented in the 2012-2013 school year, and some schools were experiencing resistance from their students in regards to the required healthier options. According to multiple articles published by TIME magazine, school food directors were reporting concerns about reimbursement and low student participation in the lunch program. As a response USDA undersecretary, Kevin Concannon, stated that schools must consistently and creatively work on food participation. He suggested schools consider dying foods such as applesauce to make it more appetizing (Sifferlin, 2013). While this may work in elementary schools, high school student were less likely to be persuaded. Many school nutrition directors felt the immediate transition to healthier options caused many students to reject school lunch (Sifferlin, 2013). A popular moment in the President Obama’s administration regarding school lunch came from a parody video that went viral on the Internet. This video surfaced in October 2012, which meant this was an immediate reaction to school lunch changes that were implemented in August 2012. The students in the video replaced the lyrics to “We Are Young” with “We Are Hungry” to emphasize that the new meals were not satisfying and becoming a
major issue in their school. USDA Secretary, Tom Vilsack responded on ABC by saying
“that’s to be expected when you’re dealing with 32 million children and you’re dealing with over
a hundred thousand districts” (Wang, 2012). Here, he implied that it was natural for some
students to reject the program. However, more reports of low student participation surfaced as
time continued.

Roosevelt High School, a school a part of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) contributed to
this conversation by speaking out in 2016. Even though their claims did not surface until 2016,
the students’ extreme dislike for school lunch suggested that poor food quality was an issue for
many years prior. Students created a website, rhsschoollunch.wordpress.com, where there were
multiple images of meals that were either molded, frozen, or containing additional objects such
as fingernail polish. CPS outsourced school lunches to Aramark, which is a food service agency
that serves prisons, hospitals, and universities. When Aramark was chosen for the task in 2014
some called this outsourcing “questionable conduct” on the school food chief’s behalf. While
this study does not investigate the intricacies of Aramark’s organization, it is important to note
that this organization was supposed to streamline the school lunch program for CPS (Perkins,
2016). Streamlining the program reduces costs, specifically administrative costs that were
frequently discussed in the congressional hearings. In this case, an introduction of a third party
impacted the quality of food students were receiving. The students made a bold statement by
saying “[Aramark] may not know how to keep us happy, but they certainly keep their investors
happy” (“The School Lunch Project”). Not only were students irate about the quality of food,
some journalists labeled the Let’s Move Campaign as a failure.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the Let’s Move Campaign was its level of
impact. Many critics were skeptical of its true impact on childhood obesity during the
administration. In a press release from the White House, President Obama stated that childhood obesity rates had declined since school lunch improvements were made and that the campaign played an active role in helping reducing these rates (The White House, 2014). In 2014, a reporter from the *National Review* evaluated President Obama’s comments and argued that childhood obesity rates were already declining prior to the First Lady’s initiative. The reporter argued that the creation of the initiative overlaps with the declining rates rather than starting a decline, making it appear as if the initiative spearheaded the improvements (Torres, 2014). It is important to note the *National Review* is a conservative magazine that is deeply rooted in American conservatism (Hart, 2006). While their opposition was not surprising, it is important to look into the statistical information surrounding childhood obesity before the initiative.

The article retrieved data released from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that showed childhood obesity rates from specific years beginning 1963-1965 to 2008. The *National Review* reporter focused on years 2003 to 2008 to analyze childhood obesity rates. The values during this timeframe reveal that only children age 2-5 experienced a decline in obesity rates. Other age groups such (6-11 and 12-19) stayed relatively the same (Ogden et al., 2010). The sole purpose of using this information was to support the claim that the Let’s Move Campaign should not be given praise for reducing obesity rates that occurred before the launch of the initiative. The same reporter released another article using data from the *Journal of American Medical Association* (JAMA) to further support the previous claim (Torres, 2014). The data from this source reiterated that children 2-5 years old declined in obesity rates while other age groups were relatively the same (Ogden et al., 2014). While the former data source stopped at 2008, JAMA released information through 2012. The reporter recognized this and stated that it
was possible the Let’s Move Campaign could have played a small role in reducing the rates for children 2-5 years old. This journalist was reacting to a comment President Obama made in his 2014 State of the Union Address. He stated, “Michelle’s Let’s Move partnership with schools, businesses, and local leaders has helped bring down childhood obesity rates for the first time in thirty years...” (The White House, 2014). The data used in the National Review article was not strong enough to challenge the President’s statement, but at the same time it is unclear what information the President used to make this statement. In 2016, the CDC reported that the obesity rates for children in 2013-2014 were similar to the past couple of years. At this point, it was difficult to gauge how much influence the Let’s Move Campaign had after its launch.

The Let’s Move Campaign was given $4.5 billion budget with the help of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010 (Wootan, 2012). Arguably, those who opposed this initiative were against the allocation of federal dollars to the program. In his 2014 State of the Union Address, President Obama stated that the childhood obesity reduction “achievement” would create lower healthcare costs. Again, this statement tied to an initiative that advocates for healthier options and environments for children supported his strategy to gain more support for his healthcare reform bill.

The reaction from the public reiterates the basis of this study. Mostly students and parents felt as if the program was largely unsuccessful at serving healthy options. This can be attributed to the fact that they were rarely present at the congressional hearings. Congress selected panelists for the hearings, and the lack of student representation showed in the public’s receptiveness. The operational issues highlighted in the hearings were changed in the reauthorization. So, naturally those impacted by these changes felt satisfied by the new policy. In this case, those impacted by operational changes were school food directors, school districts, and state governments. Funding
was the centerpiece for panelists, and healthcare reform was the centerpiece for Congress.

Judging from student reactions, food quality was their centerpiece.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Congressional hearings, press releases, magazine articles, and other government documents helped to expose whose interest were heavily considered in the reauthorization. Congress’ interests were constantly on display during hearings, as well as the interests of panelists. However, students and families were missing from congressional hearings.

Key Concepts

There are four important discoveries from this study. The first relates to the nature and scope of federal government funding. Funding concerns delayed the reauthorization process in 2009. These concerns largely stemmed from the economic crisis in 2008, which impacted school lunch funding across the United States. The Obama administration requested ten billion dollars to spread over ten years, and instead received 4.5 billion dollars over ten years for the HHFKA. An agreement to these terms caused significant debate in the Senate and House as to how federal dollars should be spent. However, the debates between the Senate and House were not shared during congressional hearings. In the congressional hearings, Congress did not explicitly state their funding concerns, but rather sought ways to conserve spending. For example, reducing administrative costs in school food departments was a way to save money. While there was a clear emphasis on cautious spending, there was a disregard for what increased funding means for many school districts. The allocation of funds has the ability to impact the quality food and
resources available to school districts. In addition, children who do not have access to quality foods outside of school need additional support to safeguard them from health conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. This aspect of the NSLP was not heavily addressed in the congressional hearings.

The second finding from this study is that interests of Congress and individual members of Congress outweigh other interests. Chairman Harkin repeatedly stated that the larger objective of the congressional hearings was to support healthcare reform and use agriculture commodities. Panelists were place in a position to appeal to these interests in order to give their testimony relevancy. For example, Congress selected panelists who advocated for healthier habits and supported stricter nutritional guidelines. By doing so, Congress believed this would eliminate health disparities, as well as reduce healthcare costs for preventable diseases. While panelists continued to focus on nutrition and ways to access nutrition, Congress maintained a focus on positioning nutrition improvements as they related to healthcare.

The third finding from this study relates to the value and need for transparency with regard to the programs. The CRS report explained funding allocation, but this was not shared with panelists during the congressional hearings. Further, there was no indication of financial offsets being needed in order to improve funding for the NSLP. President Obama stated in his SOTU address that transparency was key to rebuilding trust within society. While this certainly is the case, there needs to be more transparency on potential policy changes not just one’s policy agenda.

The final finding from this study is the need for more student, parent, and teacher representation in congressional hearings for future Child Nutrition Act reauthorizations. Arguably, students are the most important stakeholders, and yet they were not present at any of
the hearings to share their concerns. This is problematic because it is unlikely researchers, university professors, and business groups know the full extent of issues surrounding school lunch. Students, parents, and teachers must be present at congressional hearings. Stapleton and Cole (2018) conducted a study that utilized teacher perceptions of students and school lunch. Their results revealed that students face in-school food insecurity, which is another dimension to food insecurity. Food insecurity is a child who lacks access to quality and nutritious foods in their community. In-school food insecurity, as defined by Stapleton and Cole, is “the situation in which students choose not to eat school food despite being food insecure and having universally free access to school food” (Rice and Rud, 2018, p.159). Understanding student decisions in the school cafeteria is important to the success of the NSLP. Such an understanding of needs and barriers to accessing food security can only occur in situations that provide opportunities for parents and students to share their stories.

**Limitations**

This study is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis of the National School Lunch Program and all of the implications for those who participate in the program. With that, a limitation of this study is that analyses of prior Child Nutrition reauthorizations were not conducted. These findings could further determine student’s role in congressional hearings, and whether congressional hearings are simply a formality and not a true space to advocate for change.

**Opportunities for Possible Academic Research**

The purpose of this study was to reveal how the NSLP was reauthorized in an environment filled with competing interests. Avenues for additional scholarship include but are not limited to the following areas. 1) An in-depth analysis of students’ participation in the NSLP
is needed in order to further understand their decisions related to food choices in the school lunchroom. This information would benefit policymakers as well as make the federal government’s spending more efficient. 2) Gaining a deeper understanding of the extent to which Congress considers socio-cultural factors in developing nutritional guidelines and the implications therein. 3) An investigation into the perceptions of middle-income students participating in the school lunch program regarding their social status might provide interesting data on issues of class.

In summary, the purpose of this study was to reveal how competing groups viewed the program. Overall, the popularity of the NSLP is steadily increasing. The NSLP claims to safeguard the health and well being of the nation’s children, but this becomes a difficult task due to competing interests. Within each reauthorization period it is important to know the administration’s policy objectives, and understand how they impact the NSLP. Congressional hearings provide significant insight into the development process, and uncover whose interests are at the forefront. Ultimately, it can be argued that the school lunch program is as political a program funded by the federal government as any federally funded program.


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After completing her fellowship in 2016, she started at Loyola University Chicago where she pursued her Master of Arts in Cultural and Educational Policy Studies. Currently, she resides in Chicago, IL and works for a non-profit organization.