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November 15, 2018

United States Congress
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator/Representative:

On behalf of the three million members of the National Education Association and the 50 million students they serve, we are writing to express our views on the Farm Bill as negotiations are finalized. In particular, we urge you to include provisions of the Senate bill (S. 3042) that protect the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and to reject provisions of the House bill (H.R. 2) that undermine access to free school meals, roll back nutrition guidelines for school meals, or impose unnecessary new work requirements.

SNAP is our nation's largest anti-hunger program. By providing monthly benefits to eligible low-income people to purchase food, it plays a critical role in reducing hunger, malnutrition, and poverty, as well as improving family security, child and adult health, and employment. SNAP reaches key vulnerable populations — 78 percent of SNAP households include a child, elderly person, or someone with disabilities; 84 percent of all SNAP benefits go to such households. SNAP lifted 3.6 million Americans out of poverty in 2016, according to the Census Bureau's Supplemental Poverty Measure. By providing much needed economic support, SNAP allows families to have sufficient nutrition during times of unemployment, fluctuating incomes, and low-wage work.

Children living in households that receive SNAP benefits are certified to receive free school meals automatically. These healthy meals help fight hunger and improve academic performance while reducing absenteeism, tardiness, and discipline referrals. According to the Food Research and Action Center, linking children in SNAP households to school meals is so important that Congress required **all** school districts participating in the National School Lunch Program to directly certify their students for free school meals.

We urge you to reject provisions of the House bill that undermine the link between SNAP and free school meals in the 28 states that, under current rules, have chosen the broad-based categorical eligibility option that makes SNAP available to working families struggling to make ends meet. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), the proposed changes could impact direct certification for as many as 265,000 students nationwide. Students could still apply for school meals — via a burdensome paper-based process — but there is no guarantee they would remain eligible or be recertified in a timely manner, costing their families even more when they have just lost SNAP benefits. Reverting to a costly, paper-based system would also impose enormous administrative burdens on schools.

Direct certification provides the foundation for the community eligibility provision, a hugely successful option that allows over 20,000 high-poverty schools to offer free breakfast and lunch to their students. Instead of collecting and processing paperwork, schools can focus on serving healthy and appealing meals. Schools can implement community eligibility if at least 40 percent of their students are certified to receive free school meals without submitting an application.

Changing the rules for broad-based categorical eligibility to reduce the number of directly certified students also means that fewer schools could implement community eligibility, and that it would no longer be financially viable for many schools — fewer meals would be reimbursed at the free rate. Unnecessary paperwork for schools would increase and working families would lose much-needed food benefits. Children could lose free school meals, amplifying the negative impact of the cut. In short, more children could go hungry at home as well as at school.

We are also concerned about the House bill's roll back of the nutrition guidelines for school meals, which have already led to increased fruit and vegetable consumption by students. Good nutrition is particularly important for students from low-income families, who may eat as many as half of their calories every day at school. USDA recently published an interim rule for school meals that provides additional flexibility in these guidelines — changing them now would heighten uncertainty and threaten nutritional quality.

Furthermore, the House bill imposes aggressive new work requirements that are unnecessary, unworkable, and likely to do more harm than good. SNAP participants ages 18 through 59 who are not disabled or raising a child under 6 would be required to prove — every month — that they are working at least 20 hours a week, participating in a work program at least 20 hours a week, or a combination of the two. These requirements would force states to develop large bureaucracies to track millions of SNAP recipients while doing little to boost employment — especially since new funding for job training and work slots amounts to just \$30 a month, according to CBPP. The requirements would leave low-income people with barriers to employment — such as limited job skills or family members who are ill — while depriving them of earnings and food assistance.

As you consider the Farm Bill, we urge you to support the SNAP protections in the Senate version and oppose any provisions that make it more difficult for SNAP participants to receive nutrition benefits, roll back the guidelines for healthy school meals, or impose unnecessary new work requirements.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Marc Egan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent "M" and "E".

Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations
National Education Association