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Testimony before the Appropriations Committee on the  
Governor's Budget for the State Department of Education

March 1, 2011

Good evening, Senator Harp, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Lucy Nolan and I am the Executive Director of End Hunger Connecticut!, a state-wide non-profit advocacy, outreach, and education organization. I am here tonight to speak on the proposed State Department of Education budget in the Governor's budget.

I would like to address three areas in the State Department of Education budget. One is the School Breakfast line item. While this program is primarily funded with federal dollars, the state has traditionally added a small amount of funding it for schools with high free and reduced price participating students or severe-need. We are very happy that there were no cuts to the School Breakfast line item and there was a small increase in anticipation of additional schools coming on. Connecticut, while still last in the nation for the number of schools serving breakfast did have an increase in the number of children eating breakfast at school last year. This is due to outreach that is going on in the state – SDE is partnering with End Hunger Connecticut!, School Nutrition Association of Connecticut, and the New England Dairy and Food Council to increase participation.

However, as more children eat breakfast at school schools receive less in allocated state funding. Unlike the federal government and most other states in the country, Connecticut does not reimburse schools on a per meal basis, but reimburses with “available funds”. This means, that the more meals a school serves, the fewer the cents are in reimbursement. So, while we appreciate that the line item is secure, we would like to make you aware that even more funding is necessary to feed as many children as possible as we grow the program.

In addition, Connecticut has not increased the line item for school lunch in many years. What has started as a reimbursement of \$0.10 per meal is now down to \$0.05 per meal, The cost of food, transportation, health insurance, have all increased while the reimbursement has not. I would point out that the very reason that the National School Lunch Program began in 1946 was as a “measure of national security” in response to the fact that many young WWII draftees were medically unfit to go to war. Today this program ensures that children in the United States receive at least one healthy meal per school day guaranteeing our continued national security. During the 2008-2009 school year, there was a an average participation rate of 301,035 children in the School Lunch Program with 150,792 participating as free and reduced price program. Federal reimbursement to Connecticut equaled \$76,287,686.

One option for our schools is the the Healthy Food Certification Program, or Health Food Initiative as proposed in the General Fund. Currently, if schools choose to serve only healthy foods, as described by the State Department of Education, they receive an additional \$0.10 per meal served. This national precedent has been a huge incentive for over 124 school districts

(67.4%) to serve healthier menu items. It appears that the Governor intends to maintain funding. End Hunger Connecticut! is in full support of this.

A study done by the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale shows that schools that are part of the Healthy Food Certification program has better scores in teaching students about nutrition, serving healthier foods in all parts of the schools and, most importantly, is being translated to healthier nutritional choices in the student's homes.

### **Reasons why we need a significant increase in Child Nutrition State Match:**

According to Consumer Price Index, CT school lunch has lost 50% of state funding over this 30 years. Had the state kept pace with inflation from .075 in 1980 to 2010 the state match reimbursement should be of .21 per meal. School Meals and their production cost more in CT than in other regions or states. CT has a higher labor costs (for example: beginning wages are \$10 – 14 per hour in CT – CT min. wage 8.25/hour and other states ex. Alabama 7.25), higher transportation costs with the highest fuel-gasoline costs in the nation, and a higher cost of living. More than half of all states have increased state funding to support school lunch programs while the cost of living in those states has remained lower than CT.

Bottle Bill in CT-In addition, a major cost to school lunch programs from last year's bottle bill is an added cost to programs. Unintended consequence of the bottle bill resulted in decreasing school food state reimbursement by 7%.

It's important to reiterate that these are federal food programs with money already allocated to CT in reimbursement costs are still not being drawn down. Take for instance, the School Breakfast Program. CT's school breakfast participation rate is 39.1, meaning over 1/3 of low income children eating school lunch are also accessing school breakfast. If CT were to raise participation to just 60%, we could bring in an additional 7.6 million dollars. Following best practices that increase access to breakfast, like serving in the classroom and after the school bell brings can significantly increase participation

During the 2006 Connecticut legislative session \$100,000 was added to the school breakfast line item, \$50,000 of which went towards pilot grants for in-classroom breakfast. These grants made a tremendous and contagious impact on breakfast participation in the communities that took advantage of the program. The grants, awarded to schools in New Britain, Stratford, and Bridgeport, were extremely successful in upwards of tripling the number of children eating breakfast each day. This pilot project started with three schools and a year later expanded to include 17 schools within these three school districts.

Last year, the CT legislature, as a part of the Children in the Recession Legislation established an unfunded Child Nutrition Outreach Program within the State Department of Education to spearhead successful initiatives that increase access and awareness of child nutrition program. Funding for outreach initiatives is absolutely essential in connecting kids to good nutrition and acts as a catalyst to obtaining even more federal dollars to do so.

School breakfast and school lunch are some of the only nutritious meals student of low income households receive and depend on. It's our responsibility to make them accessible. If we want our children to succeed, and I believe we all do, then we must give them the tools to learn to the best of their ability.