

**Written Testimony of Mary Ann Lopez, SNS, for the Appropriations Committee
February 16, 2016**

Good evening Senator Bye, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Mary Ann Lopez and I am Director of Food Services for South Windsor Public Schools and a member of the School Nutrition Association of Connecticut.

I'm here today to testify that while we understand the challenges with the State's current fiscal budget, eliminating State Department of Education programs including School Breakfast and Healthy Food Certification is not the way forward, especially when every bit of evidence shows that not only are the meals served at school often more nutritious than meals served at home – but that children who have better nutrition perform better in school, as well.

Presently in South Windsor approximately 13% of enrolled students live in households that qualify for free and reduced price meals, either through SNAP or application. Of our 4100 students in South Windsor approximately 1700 join us for lunch each day. Families struggling with food insecurity struggle to buy fresh produce or dairy regularly. Whole grains and lean proteins are not regularly on their grocery lists. Clearly these challenges prevent any struggling household from maintaining a food budget that includes the variety of these nutrient dense foods needed for health promotion and disease prevention. Our School meal program in South Windsor has become a partner with these families to expand access to foods that promote health.

Three programs set for reductions or elimination are critical to our efforts to partner with these families – with all families in our districts. They include Healthy Food Certification, School Breakfast and State Matching funding for school lunch.

Healthy Food Certification which provides funds to school districts based on the total number of lunches served during the prior school year. For years, Connecticut and our school nutrition programs have been leaders on the national front, providing meals and snacks that exceed federal nutrition standards. This funding is extremely important to all districts participating because it goes beyond snacks and fundraising activities and impacts the overall school wellness environment within each district.

The funding we receive in South Windsor is approximately \$29,000 annually which represents 5% of our total food budget, and is equal to a little more than half of our total fresh produce budget. The loss of this funding will have a direct impact on the quantity and variety of fresh produce we will be able to offer our students. It has been my experience that students choose and consume more fruits and vegetables when fresh produce is offered. If less fresh produce is offered, there will be an overall negative impact on the health and well-being of our students today and in the future. Part of my responsibility is to help the students we are feeding today to become life-long healthy eaters. This funding is imperative to that mission.

South Windsor was among the first towns to participate in the Healthy Food Certification program. During the 9 + years we have been able to use these funds to reach out to local farmers for not only apples but peaches, pears, asparagus and other vegetables. We have also been able to expand the varieties of fresh produce offered to give students opportunities to try fruits and

vegetables grown in the USA but not typically available in schools. Finding a way to balance the budget is always difficult, but these types of extras would be negatively impacted by our loss of these funds. In addition, Healthy Food Certification influences the whole school environment particularly fundraising activities that occur on school campuses. Districts participating in Healthy Food Certification must follow the stringent fundraising guidelines which require food items being sold to adhere to the Connecticut Nutrition Standards. I personally have seen a significant decrease in the amount of candy, bake, and other junk-food type sales that were occurring in our schools prior to participating in Healthy Food Certification. And classroom celebrations have become healthy and less focused on food more focused on the reason for the celebration.

School nutrition programs in Connecticut have been historically underfunded. State matching funding is based on a block grant instituted in the 1980's and has been flat funded since. The funding formula is based on the aggregate number of meals served annually. As our number of meals served annually in districts throughout Connecticut has increased, the state funding to the school meal programs has significantly decreased; approximately 55%. Originally the block grant was funded at 10 cents per meal and today it is less than 5 cents per meal. Over the last thirty years, inflation has resulted in an increase in operating costs while the funding has continued to decrease.

In recent years, CT has made some significant progress in increasing the number of schools participating in school breakfast program and therefore in the number of breakfasts being served daily to hungry students. South Windsor Schools offers breakfast at all schools and we currently have 5 schools who qualify for state determined severe need grants. The resulting \$15,000 has been a great boost for our budget, allowing us to expand our choices for breakfast including smoothies and hot breakfast sandwiches. Our participation in our elementary schools continue to increase from previous years by 2-4% each year. Elimination of this funding will add further financial challenges to an already strained budget.

As with most School Food Service Programs, our program needs to be self-sufficient and not rely on subsidies from the Board of Education general budget. We need to operate a balanced budget regardless of financial constraints which is always challenging. South Windsor Schools has been struggling financially as have many districts with a larger percentage of students who pay full price for their meals. Our most recent meal pattern changes caused many of our secondary school paying students to question convenience over quantity. The loss of income has caused us to make some hard decisions affecting staffing and purchasing. Additional decreases in state funding will force us to dig deeper into our costs and further modify our programs. School foodservice directors across Connecticut recognize the challenges faced when it comes to high rates of childhood obesity, hunger and the lack of a balanced diet. We are committed to working hard to assist in the effort to provide our students with affordable, healthy, fresh, and delicious food options. Discontinuing Healthy Food Certification funding, as well as decreasing all state school meal funding is a disservice to the health and well-being of students in South Windsor as well as the state. I strongly urge you to reject the Governor's current budget proposal.