



### **Cindy Brooks**

Director of Nutrition Services  
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## **Written Testimony of Cindy Brooks, for the Appropriations Committee on the Department of Education Budget.**

February 16, 2016

Good evening Senator Bye, Representative Walker and the members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Cindy Brooks and I am the Director of Nutrition Services for Seymour Public Schools and the Legislative Chair for the School Nutrition Association of Connecticut.

I'm writing today to address my concerns that while we understand the challenges with the State's current fiscal budget cutting 5.75% of the State Department of Education programs, specifically School Breakfast and Healthy Foods Certification would not benefit the children of Connecticut.

This funding is not only important to Seymour Public Schools, but to all districts who participate in these programs. The funding for Healthy Foods Certification goes beyond snacks and fundraising activities and impacts the overall school wellness environment with each district. The funding for the breakfast program has enabled more districts to participate and provide a nutritious breakfast to families who would not qualify.

Presently in Seymour approximately 30% of enrolled students live in households that receive SNAP benefits formerly known as food stamps. To give you a perspective, a family of four can have a gross income of no greater than \$607 per week to qualify for SNAP benefits. Clearly these guidelines make it challenging for any household to maintain a food budget that includes a variety of nutrient dense foods such as whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables and lean proteins needed for health promotion and disease prevention. School meals in Seymour are a partner with these families to expand access to foods that promote health. A cut in these programs would affect them drastically.

The funding we receive in Seymour for these programs is approximately \$37,000 and 10% of my food 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. Also, in Seymour with the state funding for breakfast, I have been able to offer free breakfast to students who qualified for the reduced price meal. Many of those families cannot afford to spend 40 cents for lunch and 30 cents for breakfast per day. They must make a choice and many times those children will come to school hungry so they can purchase lunch. Since offering free breakfast to these families, participation has doubled in our breakfast program.

More and more students are starting their day with a nutritious breakfast. If funding is cut in these programs and less fresh produce is offered and fewer students have access to the breakfast program, there will be a negative impact on the health and well-being of our students today and in the future. Operating a school nutrition program is not easy, but an important aspect of my position is to help the students we are feeding today to become life-long healthy eaters. The funding for these programs is imperative to that mission.

# Seymour Public Schools

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As with most School Food Service Programs, we need to be self-sufficient and not rely on subsidies from the Board of Education's general budget. We need to operate a balance budget regardless of financial constraints which is always challenging.

School nutrition programs in Connecticut have been historically underfunded. State funding is based on a block grant instituted in the 1980's and has been flat funded since. The formula is based on the aggregated number of meals served annually. As meals increase, funding decreases. Originally we were funded at 10 cents per meal and today it is less than 5 cents per meals. Over the last 30 years, inflation has resulted in an increase in operating costs while funding continues to decrease.

Today Healthy Foods Certification continues to influence the whole school environment particularly fundraising activities. In Seymour, I approve all fundraisers and if they do not meet the Connecticut Standards, they are not approved. I have seen my Breakfast Program increase by 50%. This is what the funding has enabled us to do; offer a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables to our students daily and to provide more access to our programs. I am deeply concerned that without this funding I will not be able to offer the variety of produce and those students who are receiving free breakfast as their parents cannot afford an additional 30 cents per day for breakfast will not be able to participate.

School foodservice directors across Connecticut recognize the challenges faced when it come 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 student with affordable, healthy, fresh and delicious options daily. There are many districts now that not only offer breakfast and lunch but after school snacks, supper and summer feeding. We are committed to doing what is right for our students. Discontinuing the funding for these programs is a disservice to the health and well-being of the students of Seymour as well as the state.

I along with my colleagues recognize the difficult task you have, however without funding these programs, we are taking a step backward in the nation as a leader in school nutrition and Connecticut's battle with childhood obesity. We urge you not to cut the funding for these programs and to continue to stand by what is important, good nutrition for our students.

Respectfully,

Cindy Brooks

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