



MISSION: READINESS
MILITARY LEADERS FOR KIDS

November 12, 2014

Members of the United States Congress:

We, the retired senior military leaders of Mission: Readiness, urge you to stand firm to ensure that the integrity of the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act remains intact. The National School Lunch Program began as a measure of national security in 1946 when poor child nutrition compromised our ability to field a robust fighting force. With obesity now being a leading disqualifier for military service, recent attempts to thwart updated school nutrition standards could undermine our military readiness.

While America's obesity epidemic makes daily headlines, its effect on the U.S. military has largely gone unreported: a 61 percent rise in obesity since 2002 among active duty forces; more than \$1.5 billion in annual obesity-related health care spending and costs to replace unfit personnel; significant recruiting challenges with nearly one in four young adults too heavy to serve; and new Department of Defense data in our latest report, "Retreat is Not an Option," showing overall military ineligibility above 70 percent in most states.

With this in mind, we are marking the start of the third school year in which—thanks to Congress' enactment of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010—millions of students are now eating healthier school meals with more whole grains, fruits, vegetables and lean proteins. This is also the first year in which candy and many other high-calorie, low-nutrient snacks and beverages in vending machines and elsewhere are being replaced with healthier snacks and drinks. These changes are important victories in the fight against obesity. Our country's youth spend considerable time at school, and many young people consume up to half of their daily calories there. If we are to win, schools must be our allies.

Much has been made about some children not eating their fruits and vegetables, along with the cost of good nutrition. But a national survey examining students' reactions to the healthier meals, published in the journal *Childhood Obesity*, found widespread student acceptance across all grade levels according to school administrators. A Harvard University study also found that plate waste (food thrown away) decreased when the updated nutrition standards were put in place in a large school district and that children added 23 percent more fruit to their plates and consumed 16 percent more vegetables. Furthermore, a national poll released this September found that 72 percent of parents nationwide favor updated nutrition standards for school meals and school snacks, while 91 percent favor requiring schools to serve fruits or vegetables with every meal. And on the cost front, the USDA finds that schools overall are already receiving increased revenue, and school food service revenue is projected to far outpace costs over five years.

We understand that some schools may need additional support, such as better equipment and more staff training, to help meet the updated standards, and we believe that support should be provided. At the same time, moving forward with implementation of the standards for all schools is paramount.

We urge all members of Congress to stand strong and united behind the current implementation of science-based school nutrition standards, and to refrain from pursuing any mechanism that would weaken or delay the standards.

When it comes to children's health and our national security, retreat is not an option.

Very respectfully,

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