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RALEIGH, (SGRToday.com) - As complaints pour in from school districts having trouble implementing tough, more expensive food regulations, the federal agency that oversees the program is pushing back with a campaign of endorsements.

On Thursday, the U.S. Department of Agriculture issued a news release pinning the blame for the backlash on House Republicans. "Now, just as childhood obesity rates are finally starting to level off, House Republicans are trying to rollback healthy meal standards and undermine efforts to provide kids with more nutritious food," the release stated. "But more and more leaders are voicing strong support for keeping healthy meals in schools, including: the American Medical Association, the American Association of Pediatrics, the Parent Teacher Association and teachers' organizations, retired generals concerned about our country's military readiness, newspaper editorial boards across the country, 19 past presidents of the School Nutrition Association, and many others are all voicing strong support for healthy school meals."

The USDA included the following endorsements for the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act.

First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama:

"When we began our Let's Move! initiative four years ago, we set one simple but ambitious goal: to end the epidemic of childhood obesity in a generation so that kids born today will grow up healthy... Back in 2010, Congress passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which set higher nutritional standards for school lunches, also based on recommendations from the Institute of Medicine. Today, 90 percent of schools report that they are meeting these new standards. As a result, kids are now getting more fruits, vegetables, whole grains and other foods they need to be healthy. This is a big win for parents who are working hard to serve their kids balanced meals at home and don't want their efforts undermined during the day at school. And it's a big win for all of us since we spend more than \$10 billion a year on school lunches and should not be spending those hard-earned taxpayer dollars on junk food for our children."— Opinion column, The Campaign for Junk Food, May 28, 2014

Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and former Bush Administration Secretary of Agriculture

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Ann Veneman:

"Four years ago, Congress, in a strong bipartisan effort, committed to America's children that they would enjoy healthier and more nutritious meals at school. Sadly, just as we are beginning to see the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 succeed, some in Congress want to step back from that commitment. Now is not the time to backpedal on a healthier future for our kids. Two-thirds of adults and one-third of American children are overweight or obese. The cost of treating obesity-related illnesses is \$190.2 billion per year, dragging down our economy and increasing budget deficits. If nothing changes, this generation of children will be the first to live shorter lives than their parents."– Jointly authored opinion column, Don't Play Politics with Children's Health, The Hill, May 29, 2014

School Nutrition Association Past Presidents Initiative (19 former presidents of the School Nutrition Association, in a letter to Congress):

"We the undersigned past presidents of the School Nutrition Association, understand that major change takes time and a commitment to the goal that prompted the change. We believe most communities and schools want school nutrition programs that help children learn to enjoy healthy foods. We are confident that the broad public support for HHFKA and USDA's demonstrated willingness to work with school leaders to solve implementation issues will prevail and create stronger school nutrition programs."

Mission: Readiness:

"We all know that obesity rates among children have increased dramatically in recent decades. This is not only a serious health concern for these children, it has also affected who can join the military: more than one in five young Americans is too overweight to enlist; and being overweight or obese is the leading medical reason why young adults cannot join the military...We are at an important juncture. Schools are capable of serving healthier foods and the vast majority are already doing so. Congress should resist efforts to derail continued implementation of science-based nutrition guidelines for school meals and snacks. Together, we can make sure that America's child obesity crisis does not become a national security crisis."– Retired Major General Tracy Strevey, Jr., MD, former Commander of U.S. Army Health Services Command

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National Parent Teacher Association:

“Implementation of provisions included in the last reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act - the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act - continues to be a top priority for National PTA. The law dramatically improves the quality of the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, increases the reimbursement rate for meals served, supports community efforts to reduce childhood hunger, establishes nutrition standards for all foods sold in schools, and includes improvements to strengthen Local Wellness Policies (LWPs).” – Otha Thornton, President

National Education Association:

“National Education Association strongly supports the school meal nutrition standards in the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. These common-sense requirements are essential to ensuring all children a healthy and successful start in life, particularly those whose families cannot afford to provide fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy foods at home on a regular basis. The benefits and cost-savings to our children and our nation in the long-run will be significant.” – Dennis Van Roekel, President

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics:

“After only one year post-implementation, 90 percent of schools are meeting the new lunch standards. But with change comes challenges, and the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act was no exception. There is now a debate in the House to make changes to impede this progress. With the positive results, we have seen already, let's work together to help the remaining schools cross the finish line.” – President, Sonja L Connor, MS, RDN, LD, President-Elect, Evelyn F Crayton, EdD, RDN, LDN, Past President, Dr. Glenna R McCollum, MPH, RDN and Chief Executive Officer, Patricia M Babjak, GSLIS

American Medical Association:

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“Obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease are very real challenges facing far too many of our kids and the American Medical Association supports ongoing steps to improve their overall health and nutrition, including healthier school meals and reduced consumption of sugar sweetened beverages. Congress should not undermine the Institute of Medicine's science-based standards that were developed to ensure kids are eating healthy food while in school. Schools should be safe zones where kids learn healthy habits based on the best available science, and not undermined by politics or corporate influence.”— Ardis Dee Hoven, President

American Academy of Pediatrics:

“On behalf of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), a non-profit professional organization of 62,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults, I write to urge you to maintain the nutritional standards and scientific integrity of the school meals program and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC.”— James M. Perrin, MD, FAAP, President

American Heart Association/American Stroke Association:

On behalf of the American Heart Association/American Stroke Association and its more than 22 million volunteers, I am writing to express our strong support for the school food nutrition standards set forth by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. We vigorously opposed any attempt to eliminate or roll back policies such as the whole grain and sodium standards, fruits and vegetable servings, and Smart Snacks implementation. Delaying or even abolishing these standards puts our children's health in jeopardy and sets them on an early path to heart disease, stroke, disability, and early death.— Nancy Brow, CEO

American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network:

For decades, Congress has wisely ensured that federal child nutrition programs have been guided by science. ACS CAN, along with 100 national organizations and many more state and local groups, oppose attempts to use the appropriations process to change or weaken the federal child nutrition programs, including the proposed school meal waivers and changes to the

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WIC program requirements. We believe that the federal child nutrition programs should be guided by science, rather than politics.– Chris Hansen, President

Alliance for a Healthier Generation:

As we soon close out the 2013 – 2014 school year, we should be celebrating-not rolling back-the great progress that schools have made toward implementing the USDA's school nutrition standards. Nationwide, we know that over 90% of schools are meeting or exceeding the nutrition standards for school meals established in 2012. This is a significant win for the health of our children and proof that positive change is possible.– Howell Wechsler, CEO

Trust for America's Health:

“We urge Congress to oppose any provisions that would attempt to roll back school nutrition standards-and, in so doing, decrease access to healthy foods like whole grains, fruits and vegetables and increase the consumption of salt, sugar and fat. With more than 90 percent of participating schools reporting success in meeting nutrition standards set forth by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, for the first time in decades, children are eating healthier at school.”– Jeffrey Levi, PhD, Executive Director

United Fresh Produce Association:

“The fresh produce industry stands ready to support school foodservice directors in implementing the fruit and vegetable requirements. Serving one-half cup of fruits and vegetables, in ways that kids love and want to eat, is one goal that we are already accomplishing together. We commit to providing school foodservice directors with technical assistance, training in produce procurement and handling, and sharing best practices of what's working in thousands of schools across the country. This should not be a partisan issue for rancorous debate. We can all stand together to put the health of America's children first, while giving schools the technical support they need to comply with these very basic standards. Please do not vote to cut out one-half cup of fruits and vegetables from school meals. Without at least one serving of a fruit or vegetable, I don't believe we could even call it a meal. We urge you to support any amendments in the full Committee that would preserve these critical nutrition standards.”– Thomas E. Stenzel, President and CEO

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American Federation of Teachers:

"Our kids come first. That is why communities, parents, food service workers, and educators came together, demanded change, and supported access to healthier meals for all students. These standards are now in place and are working. The American Federation of Teachers is proud to stand with first lady Michelle Obama, advocates, parents, food service workers, teachers, school support staff and communities against any roll back of the current nutrition standards for school meals." – Randi Weingarten, President

Members of the Faith Community:

"As members of the faith community, we write to express our opposition to efforts to revise federal child nutrition programs through the appropriations process and urge you to ensure these nutrition programs continue to be based on the best available nutritional science, not special or political interests."– 18 Members of the Faith Community

The New York Times:

"Republicans on a powerful House committee have balked at requiring all schools to serve healthy lunches in the coming school year. The action drew a well-deserved rebuke from the first lady, Michelle Obama, who has focused public attention on combating obesity among young people through exercise and better nutrition. Let's hope the Senate holds out against such inanity... The guidelines are not all that difficult to meet; 90 percent of the nation's schools have been able to do so."– Editorial, Bad Food in School Cafeterias, June 1, 2014

The Washington Post:

"The Federal government spends more than \$10 billion a year on the National School Lunch Program, which serves more than 30 million students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

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For that, taxpayers should expect schools not to feed their children junk. That was the reasonable logic behind a 2010 law requiring stronger federal standards on school lunches - a law that Republicans in the House just voted to undercut... Given that a third of American children and teenagers are overweight or obese, this initiative is common sense... Ripping a hole in the law would be a mistake."-- Editorial, GOP Would Allow Schools to Opt Out of Nutritional Standards for Students' Lunches, May 20, 2014

USA Today:

"This would be a major, and unnecessary, step backward in the effort to make school lunches healthier. Any legitimate problems should be fixable with minor adjustments and some flexibility from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. There's no need for congressional involvement."-- Editorial, Food Fight in Congress Threatens Our Kids, May 29, 2014