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June 10, 2010

The Honorable George Miller
Chairman,
Committee on Education and Labor
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Miller,

Thank you for your longstanding leadership in the area of child nutrition. We commend you on the introduction of your reauthorization proposal, the "Improving Nutrition for America's Children Act," and look forward to working with you to help enact this reauthorization into law this year. Many of our nation's children struggle to secure access to nutritious meals, especially during this recession. Your legislation would help these children and their families in both today's environment, as well as, improve the programs for the future.

The bill would make meaningful inroads into expanding the federal nutrition safety net for children. I was particularly pleased to see that you included a provision that would establish a strong, nationwide mechanism to allow school districts to auto-enroll into the school meals program low-income children who already participate in the Medicaid. This provision is the single most effective way of expanding low-income children's access to the school meals programs.

Currently, schools are required to use data from other federal benefit programs, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), to auto-enroll children for free school meals. This process, known as "direct certification," uses data from benefit programs with rigorous application processes to determine children's eligibility for free school meals. It has proven to be a highly accurate and efficient method of connecting needy children to school meals. Expanding the reach of direct certification to Medicaid would allow for as many as 3 million children who participate in Medicaid, but not other low-income programs, to be simply and seamlessly connected to the school meals program each year.

Automatically enrolling these children without requiring their families to submit a duplicative application ensures that they can get the school meals they need. Once a family has successfully completed the application process for SNAP or Medicaid, there is no reason why a parent should have to fill out one more application to qualify for school meals. Without Medicaid direct certification, many low-income children would likely miss out on the free schools that they should be enjoying.

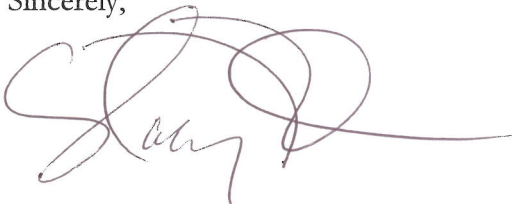
Medicaid direct certification also helps schools. If another benefit program has already rigorously assessed a family's income, there is no reason for school staff, already stretched thin, to spend time processing applications. In school districts with high rates of students eligible for free and reduced price meals, the cost of paperwork and the risk of mistakes is high. Direct certification reduces the number of applications school districts must review and verify, allowing school districts to focus on feeding children rather than processing paperwork.

Improved and expanded direct certification will also ensure the success of another critical provision in your bill – community eligibility. Under the community eligibility provision, schools that serve high concentrations of low-income children will be given a new option to serve all schools meals to their students without charge. Schools that directly certify a high proportion of their students would be eligible for the option and would not have to process individual applications or track students' eligibility in the cafeteria. Allowing these schools to serve all meals free would be an innovative means to ensure that all children in very poor neighborhoods have access to school breakfasts and lunches. This option will likely prove to be a crucial tool in reducing childhood hunger.

I also applaud your efforts to improve the effectiveness of the existing direct certification process by providing incentives to states with the best and most improved performance in this area. Currently, states vary significantly in their success at reaching all eligible children. Incentives will help to prioritize this auto-enrollment effort and ensure that all eligible children are reached.

Thank you again for your strong leadership in ensuring that our most vulnerable children receive the meals for which they qualify. When so many American families are finding it harder and harder to make ends meet, the meal that children enjoy at school may be the only full, nutritious meal they eat all day. With the passage of this bill and the direct certification provision, it will be a little easier to ensure that poor children can receive a free meal at school each day. We look forward to working with you to secure offsets for and to ensure the successful passage of this important legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Stacy Dean", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Stacy Dean, Director
Food Assistance Policy Division