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January 9, 2011

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Published Online: December 13, 2010

Obama Signs Long-Awaited School Lunch Bill



President Barack Obama talks with 3rd grader Luis Avilar-Turcios, 8, before signing the Healthy, Hunger-Free Act of 2010 during a ceremony at Harriet Tubman Elementary School in Washington on Dec. 13. —Pablo Martinez Monsivais/AP

By Christina A. Samuels

President Obama signed a long-awaited bill today that provides more money to districts for school lunches and improves nutritional standards for food provided in schools.

But education and anti-hunger groups say that work is still needed to make sure implementing the \$4.5 billion law doesn't burden school districts or harm other federal programs aimed at reducing food costs for low-income families.

Congress passed the **Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act** Dec. 3. The measure provides the first noninflationary increase for school lunches in more than 30 years, adding 6 cents per meal to district food-service budgets. Currently, districts are reimbursed \$2.72 for each free school lunch they provide; reimbursement rates are lower for

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reduced- and full-price meals.

The legislation will also make it easier for more students to qualify for free lunches by directly certifying them using Medicaid data or by eliminating paperwork requirements, and it creates new training and certification requirements for school food-service personnel.

The law also gives the U.S. secretary of agriculture the authority to put forth new nutrition standards for school meals. In October 2009, the Washington-based Institute of Medicine, an independent organization that provides information to policymakers and the public about health and science policy, [released recommended guidelines for more-healthy school meals](#), which the Agriculture Department is reviewing.

The measure also has been closely monitored by first lady Michelle Obama, who championed the improved nutrition standards as part of her overall focus on reducing childhood obesity.

But part of the child-nutrition law has been paid for through a \$2 billion cut to the nation's food-stamp program, an offset opposed by advocacy groups like the Food Research and Action Center in Washington and the School Nutrition Association, a coalition of school food-service directors based in Oxon Hill, Md.

Both groups say they have been offered assurances that the administration will work to recover funds for food stamps, which is the largest nutrition program administered by the Agriculture Department. In September, about 42.9 million people, or 14 percent of the nation's population, received food stamps. The Food Research and Action Center is encouraging lawmakers to add food-stamp money to any legislative vehicle pending in the waning days of the lame-duck session.

The advocacy group supported passage of the bill, even with the offset provision.

Mandates Created

However, the Arlington, Va.-based American Association of School Administrators, the National School Boards Association in Alexandria, Va., and the Council of the Great City Schools in Washington were aligned against the measure because they felt it put financial and legal constraints on districts. They sought to have lawmakers pass a short-term extension of the current law, rather than pass a new one.

Now that the nutrition act has passed, the three groups say they are in talks with government officials to make sure it isn't implemented in a way districts would find burdensome.

"We think it's very important that the administration reach out to school district officials," said Lucy Gettman, the director of federal programs for the NSBA. "In order for the reauthorization to be successful, school districts need to be successful, too."

The school groups say they support the nutritional aims of the legislation, but argue that adding new students to the lunch program and making changes to the nutritional components of a school lunch will cost districts money during a financially difficult time.

For example, the new training-and-certification requirements for food-service workers may be easy for large districts to meet, but in some small or rural districts, the superintendent or the school business officer also serves as the food-service coordinator. The requirements would be hard for those districts to comply with, they say.

The law also requires districts to report on the "school nutrition environment" to the

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public, meaning districts will be expected to collect information on food safety, inspections, local wellness policies, and nutritional quality and share that information with the public. That is a major expansion of federal requirements on districts that comes with no federal support, Ms. Gettman said.

Also troublesome, they say, is a provision that will require school districts to raise, over time, the price of full-price meals until they are the same as the federal reimbursement rates. Many districts charge less than \$2.72 for a full-price meal, and there is a fear that raising that price will lead to an overall drop in program participation. Supporters of the increase, however, say that, without that change, reimbursements for free meals are subsidizing the cost of meals for families who can afford to pay more.

C. Ed Massey, the secretary-treasurer of the National School Boards Association and a 13-year member of the Boone County Board of Education in Kentucky, said he supports the law's overall aim of providing healthful school meals to more students. However, his 19,400-student district has faced budget shortfalls at least two years in a row, and the budget gap is continuing to widen, he said.

"It's not that these are not important programs, they're great programs. We wish we had the money to do it all," Mr. Massey said. What he and other school groups are looking for is flexibility with the mandates, he said, to allow districts to implement "the best parts of the program that they can afford."

Vol. 30, Issue 15

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- ["School Meals Spurred Schooling Gains \(But Not Health\),"](#) (Inside School Research Blog) June 22, 2010.
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- ["Agriculture Secretary Calls for Improved Access to School Meals,"](#) (Politics K-12 Blog) February 11, 2010.

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