

North Carolina

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION | Eric C. Davis, *Chairman*

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION | Catherine Truitt, *Superintendent*

www.dpi.nc.gov

June 10, 2022

The Honorable Richard Burr, Senator
217 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Burr:

Thank you for your continued commitment to serve and support North Carolina's public schools and students as they recover from pandemic-related conditions. Like you, the Department of Public Instruction and State Board of Education are committed to providing all students with opportunities and resources needed to grow, learn and achieve. Our communication today is to inform you of our growing concerns related to the unprecedented challenges facing every school district in our state. We were briefed at the June board meeting about the potentially catastrophic impacts of soaring food, fuel, supply and labor costs on the federally assisted school nutrition programs. Rising costs, coupled with the fractured K-12 food supply chain, are posing challenges that may be difficult for local districts to overcome next school year.

Food costs in North Carolina's school nutrition programs have risen by 25% to 40% over the past 18 to 24 months. Costs of frequently used food preparation supplies have doubled. The state's primary food and supply distributors have been unable to extend contract prices from prior years because their costs have increased significantly. Recent surges in fuel prices have not only contributed to the rising cost of food, they also have increased delivery costs to more than double, and sometimes triple, the cost of deliveries. Labor costs have also increased significantly during the pandemic due to the competition for service industry. As a result, staff shortages continue to present challenges to the school nutrition programs.

As you are well aware, the child nutrition waivers that were critical in providing optimal flexibility for schools are set to expire June 30. These waivers enabled North Carolina's school nutrition programs to provide meals to food insecure, vulnerable children during the pandemic, when students were required to learn virtually and when they returned to school during the 2021-22 school year. The loss of these waivers will devastate school meal programs and threaten their sustainability. School meals will be jeopardized for thousands of North Carolina students who depend upon them as their primary source of food during the week. While we all want to put the pandemic behind us and resume normal operations, school nutrition programs are not able to return to "business as usual" for the 2022-23 school year given the conditions described above.

While school nutrition programs are largely federally assisted, they are not fully federally funded. Our North Carolina legislature has stepped up to help by providing funds to support student's co-pay for reduced-price meals at school. Students who qualify for reduced-price meals will not have to pay the \$.30 for breakfast and \$.40 for lunch in the coming school year. This will mean this subset of students who are economically disadvantaged will not be denied meals at school. Fortunately, child nutrition waivers have helped provide year-round access to much-needed nutrition. If the waivers aren't extended, thousands of children in North Carolina will lose that access to school meals in the summer and during the school year.

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AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY/AFFIRMATIVE ACTION EMPLOYER

The Honorable Richard Burr, Senator
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Local education leaders have asked us to “do something” to support the continuation of the waivers for another year to allow school nutrition programs to recover, especially given continued inflation. That is why we are **respectfully requesting your support of the bipartisan Senate Bill 3979, “Support Kids not Red Tape Act of 2022,”** that would extend USDA school nutrition flexibilities through September 30, 2023, to enable our school nutrition programs to transition to a “new normal” for the 2023-24 school year. The legislation would extend USDA’s waiver authority through September 2023, enabling local school districts to continue to recover from the current economic conditions, while continuing to provide nutritious meals to students. This will further enable the staff of the NCDPI to support local school nutrition programs for the coming year to return to more normal operations. The waivers would also ensure school districts are not penalized for failure to meet nutrition standards due to limited food supplies, which is through no fault of theirs.

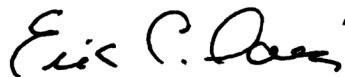
Superintendents and school nutrition directors are doing their best to recover from pandemic conditions, but it will take more time for the marketplace to rebound and for the current economy to stabilize. Continuation of the waivers for at least one more year is critical to ensure children have access to nutritious school meals, to support program sustainability and to prevent substantial financial losses for schools in our state.

If we may provide additional information, please let us know. Thank you, in advance, for considering our request.

Sincerely,



Superintendent Catherine Truitt



State Board of Education Chairman Eric C. Davis

cc: Governor Roy Cooper
Lt. Governor Mark Robinson
President Pro Tempore Phil Berger
Speaker Tim Moore
Congressman G.K. Butterfield
Congresswoman Deborah Ross
Congressman Greg Murphy
Congressman David Price
Congresswoman Virginia Foxx
Congresswoman Kathy Manning
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