

Testimony of Nikki Berlew O'Meara

House Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services Hearing
March 12, 2019

Good morning Chairman Bonamici, Ranking Member Comer, and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Nikki Berlew O'Meara, and I am a proud member of MomsRising from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Thank you for inviting me to testify today about the vital role school lunches play in my family's life and my children's nutrition.

I am the mother of a nine-year-old named James and a six-year-old named Natalie. As a single mom, money is always tight for my family. Thankfully, both my children receive free lunch at school, which is a huge help for us. The National School Lunch program has been a crucial lifeline as I strive to give my children the strong, healthy start they deserve.

One of my top priorities is giving my kids balanced diets, to help grow their minds and bodies. The National School Lunch Program's nutrition standards are a huge help. When I drop my kids off at school each morning, I know they will get a healthy lunch with the vegetables, fruit, whole grains and lean proteins that are essential for their health. The lunch they get at school is healthier and more substantial than the lunch I would be able to pack for them. And because enough students in my children's district qualify for free lunch, everyone at their school gets them - meaning my children don't have to feel singled out.

The National School Lunch Program benefits my children's nutrition outside of school, too. Because I'm not paying for lunch every day, I have more money to spend on their dinners. Money is tight in our household, so every penny counts. It means I can afford healthier options like fresh produce, as well as introduce them to new foods. I'm always trying to get my kids to try new things – which any parent will tell you is not easy! – and the National School Lunch Program gives me the buffer I need to do so. As a result, my children eat better and more diverse food, both at school and throughout the day. They love turkey tacos and chuck roast with potatoes at home and at school they like to eat chicken sandwiches, meatloaf, and mandarin oranges. I've been trying for years to get my daughter to try salad and she finally tried it at school with her friends!

If we did not have the National School Lunch Program, my kids' meals would be simpler and less nutritious. We also wouldn't be able to afford the occasional discounted movie night or even going out to eat for birthdays, which create

precious memories for my family. I know what it's like to have to cut costs like that; we have endured difficult periods where we had to cut those expenses and more. After my divorce, things were really tough. We used SNAP benefits for awhile, and I was wearing two hoodies at home when the kids were out, to save on utilities. During those periods, the National School Lunch program was even more crucial for us. Simply put, without it, my kids would have eaten much less. And they would have eaten more meals like pasta and white rice, which keep their bellies full but don't provide the nutrition they need to grow.

The National School Lunch Program provides essential support for my children's education, as well. It is so important to me that they get the best education possible, so they can reach their potential and pursue their dreams, and these programs are a huge part of that. If my kids did not get the food and nutrition they need, they would be much more distracted at school. They would not be thinking about upcoming vocabulary tests or science projects, but instead they would be thinking about – and wishing for – their next meal. Simply put, kids can't learn if they're not getting proper nutrition. Because my children get well-balanced meals at school, they can focus on what matters most: feeding their minds and broadening their horizons by working hard in their classes.

As the committee discusses the reauthorization of child nutrition programs, I hope you will remember James, Natalie, and other families like mine. The decisions this committee makes will have a significant impact on working families and whether we will be able to set our children up for success. Child nutrition programs need to continue to be well-funded, supported, and improved, not only for my kids, but for the other children at their school who have fallen on much tougher times.

My kids deserve healthy food, and all kids deserve healthy food -- regardless of how much money their parents make. These programs are a crucial part of ensuring their basic needs are met. Thank you for remembering the importance of healthy food for our nation's next generation.