

Mr. Chairmen and members of the committee, my name is Mary Ellen Holverson and I am here representing the Montana Dietetic Association.

Our goals as dietitians are to help children

- ❖ Enjoy food
- ❖ Promote physical and cognitive development
- ❖ Reduce risk of chronic disease
- ❖ Achieve a healthy weight

A simple, effective way to work toward these goals is to improve the school meal environment.

1. HB479 will help school districts make healthier school meals by enabling them to update or add food service equipment, such as child-size salad bars or milk coolers.

- ❖ Children will be healthier because they are offered a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables on a regular basis. If they get in the habit of eating them while they are young, they will be protected from chronic diseases later on. Fruits and vegetables are low calorie, nutrient dense foods which if substituted for higher calorie foods will help impact the obesity problem that is reaching epidemic proportions among our school children. Studies show that school children are only getting 1.7 servings of the recommended 5-a-day of fruits and vegetables. However, in schools with salad bars, children are now eating almost 3 servings. Also, salad bars increase school lunch participation which means greater federal reimbursement for schools and improved diets for children.
- ❖ Children will drink more milk products if appropriate equipment is available to display and offer them. Why is this important? Over the past decades milk consumption has dropped 32% while soft drinks have increased 41%. This is disturbing because childhood is when calcium and vitamin D is needed for maximum skeletal growth and bone mineralization. By not drinking dairy products, many of these kids may develop osteoporosis at an earlier age. Also, soft drinks are thought to be one of the major contributors to overweight in our children.

2. School districts could also use these funds to either start-up or enhance School Breakfast Programs. Currently, 22,000 children in 177 Montana schools (almost a quarter of all schools) do not have a School Breakfast Program. Schools often need a small amount of funding support to get a breakfast program started. Once the program has been implemented, it is sustainable through the federal reimbursement.

- ❖ Breakfast is the most important meal of the day for growing children. Children that eat breakfast have a greater intake of grains, milk, fruit and overall nutrients than those who skip breakfast. And children participating in the School Breakfast Program have even higher intake of vitamins and minerals than those who eat breakfast at home. This is probably because the school offers all breakfast components – dairy, grains, fruit, and protein foods and at home some of the components may be missing when the child fixes his own breakfast or grabs something as he runs out the door. At school, the child is able to sit down to a breakfast instead of eating in a rush. The child also eats a meal closer to actual classroom time, which affects how well he does on class tests.
- ❖ When I worked as an administrator at RMDC's Head Start Program, I observed that kids who came to class late without breakfast were often cranky, inattentive, and sometimes aggressive. When they were offered something to eat, these symptoms of hunger disappeared. My observations are born out in national studies that consistently show children who eat breakfast are better able to concentrate and learn, have fewer classroom behavioral problems, do better academically, make fewer trips to the nurse, and are absent less often. Specifically, the Maryland Meals for Achievement study found standardized test scores increased 17 percent above the state average, tardiness decreased by 8 percent and referrals to the office for discipline decreased by 20 percent.

The Montana Dietetic Association believes that our schools have a critical role in helping students learn and practice healthy eating habits. It is important to learn to read, write or do sums or science to become knowledgeable citizens. It is just as important for children to learn how to make wise food choices and develop habits like eating fruits and vegetables and drinking milk as this will help them live longer, healthier, and more productive lives. We urge you to vote a "do pass" on HB 479. Thank you.

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