Fact Sheet: Support the Healthy Future Students and Earth Pilot Program Act (H.R.3276)

Reintroduced this Congress by Representatives Velázquez and Bowman, this legislation will create a pilot grant program to provide healthy, climate-friendly plant-based meals and help overcome barriers for students to access plant-based milk options in our nation's public schools.

Why help schools serve plant-based options?

Whether for health, environmental, philosophical, religious, or other reasons, students and their families are increasingly asking for more plant-based options at school. In California, a recent analysis found that despite the growing demand from students and efforts from school foodservice operators to scale up healthy, climate-friendly menus, only 4% of entrees in California lunches are plant-based.[i] This bill seeks to overcome several of the barriers to serving healthy, culturally appropriate, and climate-friendly lunches that schools often face. These include a lack of technical assistance, training, and student nutrition education, as well as cost since animal-based foods are heavily subsidized relative to plant-based foods. Note that this program is completely voluntary and in no way limits or restricts animal-based meal options.

- **Health:** Studies show that increasing consumption of plant-based foods has substantial health benefits, including reducing the risk of diabetes, reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease, maintaining a healthy weight, and protecting against certain forms of cancer and other diseases.[ii] Students of color disproportionately rely on school meals as a primary source of nutrition, so improving the quality of school meals is a crucial point of intervention to mitigate racial health disparities, which emerge early in life.[iii] Healthy, plant-forward diets can also boost academic performance and address educational inequities.[iv] Adding more plant-based options would also help bring school meals into greater alignment with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, which recommend increasing fiber intake and diversifying sources of protein.[v]
- **Climate:** The food and agriculture sector accounts for between 21 and 37% of global greenhouse gas emissions,[vi] and research has shown that we cannot meet the Paris Accord targets without shifting our diets toward more low carbon foods.[vi] Animal-based foods tend to be more carbon-intensive than plant-based foods because of the high resource requirements for raising animals, including water and animal feed.[viii] With 30 million children served lunch daily, the National School Lunch Program represents a crucial opportunity to mitigate food related greenhouse emissions and environmental impacts, while also improving student health.
- **Equity:** Plant-based options are crucial to accommodating all students, including those who are unable to process lactose or who follow a plant-based diet or do not consume certain animal products for religious, health, cultural, or ethical reasons.

Why remove barriers for students to access non-dairy milk options?

Currently, schools are not required to provide a nondairy substitute unless a parent submits a note from a physician documenting a disability that restricts their child's diet. Schools can choose – but are not currently required – to provide a nondairy substitute if a student submits a note from a physician or parent stating a medical or dietary reason (other than a disability) that the student may not be able to consume dairy milk.

The requirement for a physician's note creates a financial and administrative burden for parents and disproportionately affects students of color. The cost of a physician visit (and the lost time from work for a parent) is an unnecessary hurdle that prevents students from receiving appropriate nutrition at school. Specific populations of color have high levels of lactose intolerance, including approximately 95% of Asian Americans, 60% to 80% of African Americans, 80% to 100% of American Indians, and 50% to 80% of Hispanics, according to the National Institutes of Health. Moreover, the inability to digest lactose is a specific genetic trait, like left-handedness or having curly hair, not a disability. In many communities in our country, it is the norm not the exception. Parents, students, and schools, all need more flexibility to ensure the school meal program is serving nutritious meals to all participants.

In short, the *Healthy Future Students and Earth Act* would:

- **Establish a new $10 million grant program for school districts to apply for a three-year pilot program to help them offer more plant-based entrée options to students.** School districts that serve a high population of food insecure students will be prioritized. Grant funding can be used for:
    - Culinary training and technical assistance for school foodservice operators and staff.
    - Procurement costs of plant-based sources of protein from socially disadvantaged producers, local farms, and women, veteran, and beginning farmers.
    - Marketing and student engagement, such as conducting taste tests and providing nutrition education.
    - Additional labor costs incurred in preparing and serving plant-based options.
- **Require – rather than allow – school districts to provide a non-dairy fluid milk substitute to children without a disability if a parent or guardian makes a written request to the school district.**
- **Authorize school districts to provide a non-dairy fluid milk alternative (consistent with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*) to any student as part of a reimbursable meal without a note.**
- **Make it easier for students whose disability restricts their diet to access alternatives.**
- **Create a pilot grant program to help schools offset the cost difference between dairy and non-dairy milks**, which will be prioritized at schools that serve a high population of students with lactose intolerance.

[i] Hamerschlag, K., & Kraus-Polk, J. (2021). The State of School Lunch in California. Friends of the Earth. https://foe.org/resources/the-state-of-schoollunch-in california/

[ii] Micha, R., Wallace, S. K., & Mozaffarian, D. (2010). Red and Processed Meat Consumption and Risk of Incident Coronary Heart Disease, Stroke, and Diabetes Mellitus: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. Circulation, 121(21), 2271–2283.
Melina V, Craig W, Levin S. Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: vegetarian diets. *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2 016 ;116 :19 70 -198 0
McMacken M, Sapana S. A plant-based diet for the prevention and treatment of type 2 diabetes. *J Geriatr Cardiol*. 2017;14:342–354. April 30, 2021, 11:54 AM

[iii] https://www.hindawi.com/journals/bmri/2013/787616/

[iv] https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/health-academic-achievement.pdf

[v] USDA and HHS. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025-2030*. https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/resources/2020-2025-dietary-guidelines-online-materials

[vi] Hong, C., Burney, J. A., Pongratz, J., Nabel, J. E. M. S., Mueller, N. D., Jackson, R. B., & Davis, S. J. (2021). Global and regional drivers of land-use emissions in 1961–2017. *Nature*, *589*(7843), 554–561. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-03138-y; IPCC. (2019). *SPECIAL REPORT: Climate Change and Land*. https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/

[vii] Kim, B., Neff, R., Santo, R., Vigorito, J. (2015). The importance of reducing animal product consumption and wasted food in mitigating catastrophic climate change. Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future Report prepared for United Nations Conference of the Parties 21 (COP21). Retrieved from https://www. jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-a-livable-future/_pdf/research/clf_reports/2015-12-07e-role-of-diet-foodwaste-in-cc-targets.pdf [vii]
Heller, M. C. and Keoleian, G. A. (2015), Greenhouse Gas Emission Estimates of U.S. Dietary Choices and Food Loss. *Journal of Industrial Ecology,* 19: 391–401. doi:10.1111/jiec.12174_, Supporting Information (3)
Nemecek, T. & Poore, J., Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers. *Science* 01 Jun 2018: Vol. 360, Issue 6392, pp. 987-992 DOI: 10.1126/science.aaq0216

[ix] US Department of Health and Human Services. "Lactose Intolerance: Information for Health Care Providers." US Department of Health and Human Services (2006): 1-6.