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Oral Testimony of the Maine Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Presented by Patricia Watson, MS, RD, LD, CDE

Good afternoon Senator Millett, Representative MacDonald and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Pat Watson. I am a registered and licensed dietitian, and member of the Maine Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. I am presenting this testimony on behalf of the 331 professionals who are members of the Maine Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (MAND). We are a non-profit organization affiliated with the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the world's largest organization of food and nutrition professionals, with over 77,000 US members.

I am here today to convey MAND's support for LD 1160: An Act to Reduce Obesity Among Schoolchildren.

LD 1160 contains two sections. Section 1 of this bill requires students from kindergarten to grade 5 to participate in a minimum of 30 minutes of physical activity each day at school. Section 2 prohibits schools from using food as a reward or punishment for behavior or performance in kindergarten through grade 12. MAND supports the full bill but wishes to provide testimony on section 2.

Childhood obesity is a significant problem in our State. Although we recognize that, like most public health challenges, the causes of obesity are varied; as nutrition professionals concerned with the health of our citizens at all ages, it makes sense to focus on food and nutrition as a primary area where schools can positively impact the health of schoolchildren. Nutrition is a basic part of many schools' health curricula; school wellness policies also provide a good framework for the communication of accurate nutrition messages to schoolchildren. Presenting consistent nutrition messages to schoolchildren is a fundamental way to help instill more healthful eating behaviors that will benefit children now. And given that researchers have found that obese children are more likely to become obese adults and are at a greater risk for diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke, nutrition education is likely to positively impact the general public health of Mainers in the future as well.¹ The 2010 joint position paper of the American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, School Nutrition Association and Society for Nutrition Education "Comprehensive School Nutrition Services" references the US Department of Agriculture's "Promoting healthy eating, an investment in the future: A Report to Congress" from 1999 in stating "Teaching and promoting healthful eating

with an integrated cafeteria-classroom approach is essential to address childhood health and education problems.”²

It’s logical to ensure that all nutrition messages schoolchildren receive are consistent and reinforcing. We support LD 1160, which reinforces some of the current national efforts to limit the practice of using food as a reward (or punishment) in school. The Head Start Program regulations specifically state *“Food is not used as punishment or reward, and that each child is encouraged, but not forced to eat or taste his or her food.”*³ In addition, part of the criteria for being selected for a Healthier US School Challenge Award (a program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service) is that the *“...school demonstrates a commitment to prohibit the use of food as a reward. For example, food is not used to reward students for good behavior or for the completion of an assignment.”*⁴ In addition, Kids Eat Right, a well-known school- and community-based nutrition education program that addresses childhood obesity cites *“using food for reward or punishment”* as one of the environmental influences that can lead to weight gain.⁵ Using food as a reward in school contradicts and undermines the nutrition messages presented to the children in school.

Another issue presented when food is used as a reward in schools relates to the National School Lunch program. Foods that are typically used as rewards, such as candies, have no place in the National School Lunch program.⁶ Indeed, the practice provides yet another area where children would receive conflicting messages about healthy food and nutrition while at school.

In their flyer *“Alternatives to Food Rewards”* the Connecticut State Department of Education quotes Marlene Schwartz, PhD then Deputy Director and currently Acting Director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, Yale University stating *“Rewarding children with unhealthy foods in school undermines our efforts to teach them about good nutrition. It’s like teaching children a lesson on the importance of not smoking, and then handing out ashtrays and lighters to the kids who did the best job listening.”*⁷ Creative positive nonfood reward ideas are plentiful.⁸

Consistent nutrition standards based on scientific evidence in the school environment are essential for clarity of the nutrition messages that the students receive; they understand what healthy food choices are when they discuss them as well as see them modeled. Members of the Maine Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics work in schools and with school-based programs providing a variety of services that are all designed to enhance the nutritional status of children while at school, as well as instill sound nutritional principles that they can take with them into adulthood. LD1160 aligns with our goals as food and nutrition professionals working with schoolchildren and it supports the immediate and future health of the children in Maine.

We urge your support of LD 1160: An Act to Reduce Obesity Among Schoolchildren.

References

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