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STATEMENT BY MISS JEAN FAIRFAX, CHAIRMAN, COMMITTEE ON
SCHOOL LUNCH PARTICIPATION, WASHINGTON, D.C., APRIL 16

Millions of American children are not getting their daily bread. The National School Lunch Program, which affluent Americans comfortably assume is available to all, has no room at its table for 9 million needy school children. Fewer than 4% of the nation's school children receive free or reduced price lunches. The poorer his school, the less hope the poor child has of getting a mouthful of benefit from a program in which over 465 million dollars of Federal funds will be spent this year through the Department of Agriculture.

In hundreds of communities across this land of abundance needy children are completely locked out of the school lunch program because their schools lack cafeterias. Many of these are urban slum schools and now targets of parental anger and protest. In many other schools, rural and urban, where there is a lunch program, a poor child will eat today only if this is his turn by rotation, or if he can share the meal of a compassionate teacher or fellow student, or if his efforts to scrounge left-overs are successful.

That children are hungry in wealthy America is an outrage which the conscience cannot permit officialdom to explain away. The Department of Agriculture must accept a major part of the responsibility. It has undertaken no studies and has no blueprint for a truly inclusive National School Lunch Program. The Department permits states to use children's fees for their matching funds, an administrative interpretation of the law which undoubtedly encourages states not to allocate tax revenue to subsidize the program. By its failure to enforce the law and its own regulations, USDA allows the schools to evade their contractual agreements to provide free meals without discrimination to all needy students. Because it has established no uniform criteria for determining eligibility for free meals, the Department is responsible for a crazy quilt pattern which results in the exclusion of poor children from the program.

The lack of funds is at the heart of the problem of providing free meals for children from low-income families. But an approach which relies solely on the injection of more money into the present system and which focuses only on the poorest children will not provide a lasting solution. The spiral of rising fees is forcing many other children out of the lunch program. Paradoxically, the kind of changes needed to make the National School Lunch Program benefit the poor will save it for children from moderate income families.

The National School Lunch Program has been under-nourished by Congress. Appropriations have never kept pace with growing costs and needs. It has been starved by states and localities most of which contribute no funds from taxes to feed school children.

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The present method of financing school lunches rests on assumptions which we must reject: that school lunches should be treated and financed differently from other school programs and that the program must be self-supporting. More than half of the cost is borne by the children who pay for their lunches. Their fees must usually cover the costs of administration, labor, equipment, food-handling and free meals. We have been told that the school lunch program was not intended to be a welfare program. Indeed it is a welfare program: by children, for children. The present system is unfair. It is not working.

We need a totally new approach based on a new assumption that nutrition is an integral part of the total educational process. The school lunch should be a basic part of the free public education to which every child has a right.

Therefore, our major recommendation is for a universal, free school lunch program. To pave the way, we call upon this session of Congress to authorize incentive grants to local units of government to encourage the development of models of area-wide, inclusive nutrition programs.

We urge the President to appoint a National Commission to design a free lunch program as part of a comprehensive nutrition and food service program for all children and youth.

We call upon Secretary Freeman to support and provide leadership for the implementation of our recommendations. We particularly urge his Department to give top priority to our short-run recommendations and give immediate attention to those which could be achieved through administrative action. We recommend for the interim:

1. Reduction of the price of the school lunch to 20¢ to bring it within reach of the majority of children, to be achieved through cooperative Federal, state and local financing;
2. Massive effort to feed all needy children who should be identified by universally applicable criteria for eligibility and the banning of practices which discriminate against and humiliate them;
3. Administrative changes to promote district-wide participation in the National School Lunch Program, to ensure that all needy children are included, to promote efficiency and to unify administration of all school food service programs.

The Committee on School Lunch Participation was created by 5 national organizations whose combined constituencies total over 30 million women: Church Women United, the National Board of the YWCA, the National Council of Catholic Women, the National Council of Jewish Women and the National Council of Negro Women. The common thread throughout our diverse religious traditions is concern for the poor. Our individual consciences are pricked at the knowledge that one child is hungry. We are aroused to collective action when we discover that a program designed for the nurture of children is failing to reach those who need it most.

The Committee has studied the operation of the National School Lunch Program in 40 school districts across the land. Partial studies were made in five more communities. We have interviewed over 1500 people: officials in the Department of Agriculture and other Federal agencies, state school lunch directors and other officials in 39 state capitals, nutritionists, experts at universities and medical centers, local school district officials, principals, teachers, welfare workers, parents,

community leaders and representatives of many concerned national organizations.

THEIR DAILY BREAD is our report. Toward the implementation of its recommendations, we shall rally the women of America to work nationally and in their states and communities for understanding and for the required financial support.

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