

# ACT Opens Door for Regional School Food

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by *Carey L. Biron*

For the first time, the federal government will be providing substantial seed money to programs throughout the country designed to integrate locally produced food products into the public school system.

With six days to go before a June 30 deadline, the U.S. House and Senate passed by unanimous consent two nearly identical bills. When the President signed the legislation that afternoon, the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act 2004 became federal law.

Acting on a number of far-ranging recommendations by health professionals and the American Food Service Association, the bill mandates several groundbreaking policy changes relating to children's health. In addition to the potential health- and environment-related ramifications, the new legislation could also prove a boon to rural and farm economies.

"Food is a really unifying thing," explained Karen Lehman, a food systems specialist with the MN Project, a sustainable development nonprofit started by Mark Dayton in 1979. "We've always had a holistic view of food's place in society — that it's what keeps many rural communities going; that it's a central enterprise."

The Child Nutrition Act (CNA) is a regularly reauthorized piece of legislation that oversees safety-net services for vulnerable children — like the School Lunch Program and WIC services — as well as promoting nutrition education and regular exercise.

Included in the 2004 version of the CNA, however, are new provisions providing grant funds for both so-called Farm-to-Cafeteria initiatives, as well as school farm/garden projects. Although still in the appropriations process, proponents are hoping for upwards of \$10 million in funding.

While the USDA has tacitly acknowledged farm-to-cafeteria programs since 1997, the more than 400 projects in 23 states have been almost entirely built upon local and regional initiatives. Advocates hope that the new federal legislation will raise awareness and receptivity in the public school system for these projects.

Lehman says that it's important to think of the supply chain as a whole. "On the one hand, it's great to say 'let's get local food into schools and cafeterias.' But how do you actually do that? In fact, when you're making institutional sales, it's a very different ball game than doing something

Most schools, Lehman explained, have very large contracts with distributors. The MN Project has been attempting to create a local foods working group — bringing a major distributor like Sysco MN together with people like the U of M, the Department of Agriculture, other nonprofits and farmers groups. The goal would be to come up with a model that would make it more likely that schools could get these local products through their existing distributors and contractors.

Groups like the MN Project have been fighting an uphill battle for these issues for a long time, and the recent federal legislation may give their efforts a boost.

Regarding the passage of the CNA, Lehman notes that, "For so many years, schools have had to

depend in part on the money that the soft drink companies bring in through their contracts. The fact that they could, for example, de-emphasize milk provisions in favor of soft drink provision is astonishing ... so the [CNA] starts to turn some of that around. It also creates a market for products, so that all of a sudden there's a place to sell them for a company that is looking for ways to move local produce into local markets."

**U.S. Congresswoman Betty McCollum (D-St. Paul) strongly supported these new provisions. Minnesotans, she explained, are now one or two generations away from the farm and are beginning to think collectively about what this means for children.**

**"Teachers, health care professionals, parents finally came together, realizing that lifestyles have changed for our children," McCollum said. "States in the upper Midwest are watching the effects on this new generation of children in urban areas, who are growing up with no access to farms and gardens."**

**McCollum says that teachers across the country are aware of the growing obesity epidemic among youngsters. Being a former teacher herself, she looks forward to the new legislation allowing educators to incorporate realistic discussions of nutrition into their schooldays. "These provisions will instill in kids a realization of the importance of a clean, healthy environment – both outside and inside their bodies," she said. In addition to the provisions on farm-to-cafeteria and school garden initiatives, the CNA takes another significant step regarding child nutrition — stopping federal subsidies on irradiated foods.**

In 2003, despite a lack of long-term research, the USDA approved irradiated beef to be served in the National School Lunch Program. Setup to provide free and reduced-price school lunches to in-need children, the decision essentially denied over 27 million kids the right to refuse irradiated products.

Now, the CNA, reversing a former stance, includes provisions barring the federal government from subsidizing irradiated food products. In addition, any irradiated foods distributed by federal food programs must be labeled as such. Despite this new legislation, both the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and the Minnesota Department of Health continue to recommend the use of irradiated ground beef.

"It's very important that attention has started to shift, to focus on what's being served in our schools," said Karen Lehman. "It's really something that is so holistic and integrated that anytime you have any impact on any part of that system in a positive way, you're going to have a larger ripple effect through the system as a whole."