



How Can Public-Private Partnerships Impact Public Policy?

**Edward M. Cooney
Executive Director
Congressional Hunger Center
August 19, 2011**

The Congressional Hunger Center gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the ConAgra Foods Foundation for The CHILD Project (Children's Hunger Initiative on Learning and Development) for which this paper was prepared.

Introduction

In today's politically charged atmosphere, many observers of the Congressional legislative process have raised the question: what is the most effective way to engage the Administration and the Congress in formulating public policy decisions that will benefit the nutrition and health status of America's children and families? Is it the well-timed press release, the thoughtful personal letter, an inspiring op-ed, or a pointed letter to the editor? All of these activities have merit and on occasion lead to important action by public officials.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how public-private partnerships can have a significant and long lasting impact on public policy. One example of a highly successful public-private partnership is the Child Nutrition Forum (CNF).

CNF's Statement of Purpose

CNF provides a platform from which organizations with widely divergent purposes and interests can express in a unified voice their support for effective and adequately funded federal nutrition programs for children. Specifically, the Forum embraces the chief objectives of the National School Lunch Act of 1946 and the Child Nutrition Act of 1966. These are: "...to safeguard the health and well being of the Nation's children, and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural foods". The Forum meets whenever issues of national nutrition policy affecting children arise, particularly during reauthorizations of child nutrition programs.

History

In 1979 Senator George McGovern convened a group of national anti-hunger organizations and major agricultural producers and commodity groups for a discussion of the future of child nutrition programs. Senator McGovern was concerned that then Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) Secretary Abe Ribicoff had expressed the viewpoint that perhaps the expansion of programs like School Breakfast would be enhanced if the program was transferred to HEW. Senator McGovern was a strong believer in the view that all federal nutrition programs should keep their ties to agriculture and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) for maximum effectiveness and maximum "political protection". Susan Friday of the National Milk Producers Federation was asked to head up a national child nutrition coalition in order to protect these programs and keep them at USDA. In 1981, a few members of the coalition supported the Reagan Administration's proposals to cut child nutrition program benefits. The coalition was immediately terminated. Geoff Becker, then a writer for the Community Nutrition Institute newsletter, suggested that the remaining coalition groups could perform an important national service by becoming a Forum where all sides of significant national nutrition policy issues could be discussed, debated and solutions presented. Ed Cooney of the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) and Marshall

Matz of the School Nutrition Association were elected co-chairs of the CNF. In 1997, Ellen Teller of FRAC replaced Ed Cooney as co-chair. Over the next several years CNF held public forums on:

- universal free school lunch and breakfast programs,
- child nutrition block grant proposals,
- competitive food regulatory issues, and
- program management topics.

In 1983, members of the CNF authored a publication entitled “Doing More with Less”. This booklet was distributed to every school district. It advised local school districts how to save money through:

- improved labor/management agreements.
- creative use of donated federal commodities.
- direct marketing of local farm products to schools.
- improved marketing of the benefits of participation in school meals.

CNF Members

There are approximately 250 national organizations with over 15 million members including:

Education

- National Education Association
- American Association of School Administrators
- National PTA
- National Association of Elementary School Principals

Nutrition and Health

- American Academy of Pediatrics
- American Dietetic Association
- Society for Nutrition Education

Private Sector

- International Dairy Foods Association
- National Milk Producers Federation
- United Egg Producers
- United Fresh Produce Association

Elected Officials

- National League of Cities
- US Conference of Mayors

Unions

- American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
- Service Employees International Union
- United Food and Commercial Workers

Anti-Hunger

- Bread for the World
- Congressional Hunger Center
- Feeding America
- Food Research and Action Center
- Share Our Strength

Impact of Public-Private Partnerships on Public Policy

When there is a new Administration and/or a new Congress, major public policy positions on child nutrition programs can be enhanced, revised or ended. However, on rare occasions a victory in the public policy arena can have a permanent impact on how elected officials make future decisions on programs designed to protect the nutrition and health status of the nation's children. One such example was the 1981 withdrawal of the now infamous "Ketchup as a Vegetable Regulation." This proposed regulation was withdrawn because of the direct intervention of the member organizations of the CNF. Its impact is still felt today in 2011.

Background of Ketchup as a Vegetable

In 1981, the Reagan administration proposed and Congress adopted budget cuts reducing expenditures in child nutrition programs by \$1.5 billion, a 28 per cent cut in this account. Student participation in school meals programs dropped by over 2 million children. In an attempt to offset the true impact of the cuts (schools would have 8 cents less in federal reimbursements to produce a meal meeting current nutrition standards under this legislation) the USDA decided to "credit" certain items as qualified for federal reimbursements. The most famous of those decisions was to "credit" ketchup as a vegetable, although other changes included reductions in portion sizes of fruits and vegetables, milk, protein, and grains. The Department was making a good faith effort to assist local schools faced with drastic cutbacks in federal funds for their lunch programs. But the effect of such decisions was to actually lower the quantity and quality of school lunches. The long standing nutrition standard for school lunches—that each child over time is served a meal that meets the one-third Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA)—was effectively lowered to one-fourth of the RDA. Had this regulation been

implemented, the nutrition and health status of the nation's children and, indeed, the reputation of the National School Lunch Program would have been permanently damaged. The Food Research and Action Center and fellow members of CNF launched a massive public relations campaign to raise awareness about the proposed regulation and its likely negative impact. Within two weeks over 8000 comments uniformly opposed to lowering school lunch nutrition standards by labeling ketchup as a vegetable were received by USDA. As a direct result, the regulation was withdrawn.

Why was the Proposed Regulation Withdrawn?

The regulation was withdrawn because of the nature and depth of the CNF partnership and the public education campaign it launched on this ill-advised regulation. The combined opposition of education, nutrition-health, private sector, elected officials, and unions and their active memberships at the local and state level created a power base that every member of Congress was willing to meet with and listen to. Elected officials began to realize that every town or city has a school lunch program and most children in those schools have two parents that vote. A simple school lunch became a potent political issue because parents believed that nutrition standards affecting their children's ability to learn at school were threatened. The CNF also has strong representation in the farm community, civil rights, children and women rights groups, and religious organizations. These CNF member organizations can have a very positive impact on the decision-making of elected officials because they have able leadership, a strong consensus on their viewpoint, and the ability to present their position in a forceful, but respectful, manner.

The Ketchup as a Vegetable regulation was one of the most widely covered news stories of the latter part of the 20th century. Thanks to a press release developed by the staff of the Food Research and Action Center detailing the regulation and its potential impact (released on September 4, 1981), a news story appeared the next day as the top story on the front page of the New York Times. Soon after the Washington Post and every other major print news outlet in America filed a story generally pointing out that this regulation was harmful to children and simply "un-American". Cartoonists, particularly Gary Trudeau, had a field day with over 100 cartoons attacking the wisdom of publishing this regulation. NBC Evening News, experimenting with the new technology of "TV graphics", showed a picture of a farmer watching 2 ounces of milk literally disappearing from his TV screen (the regulation reduced the required serving of milk from 8 ounces to 6 ounces daily). Farmers across the nation were left to imagine 27 million children drinking 2 ounces less of milk for 180 days of the school year and, perhaps permanently, leaving children with the lifelong feeling that consuming less milk was all right for their health. The 180,000 members of the National Milk Producers filed comments seeking the immediate withdrawal of the regulations. The United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Producers, National Cattlemen's Beef Association, and the National Association of Wheat Growers quickly followed the lead of the dairy farmers. The major nutrition and health groups, led by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Society of Nutrition Education, strongly opposed lowering the school lunch nutrition standard from providing children with one-third of the RDA over time (within 10 days) to one-fourth of the RDA. The 7 million members of the National PTA opposed the regulation along with the 2

million members of the Nation Education Association. The US Conference of Mayors got the attention of the National Governors Association and the National Conference of State Legislatures on school meal regulations. It was the combined efforts of all these groups, led by the CNF partners, which resulted in the withdrawal of this misguided regulation.

How has the decision to Withdraw the Ketchup as a Vegetable Regulation Affected Child Nutrition Policy Over Time?

It is not possible to overestimate the impact that the CNF public-private partnership has had since their forced withdrawal of the Ketchup as a Vegetable rule. The principle that effective federal nutrition standards in school meals are vitally important to children's health and learning and, indeed, the health of the nation and that elected officials tinker with these standards "at their peril" survives to this day. Here are some of the significant nutrition public policy debates between 1981 and 2011 in which the CNF partnership and the impact of the lessons learned from the Ketchup as a Vegetable rule were major factors in the outcome:

- 1983 ... Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole testifies before the House Education and Labor Committee in opposition to the "New Federalism" proposals that would have returned administration of child nutrition programs to the states, thereby eliminating the entitlement status of school meals and removing all federal nutrition standards. New Federalism proposals were subsequently rejected.
- 1994 ... CNF supports legislation requiring school meals to meet the Dietary Guideline for Americans nutrition standards. The legislation was enacted.
- 1994-95 ... House Speaker Newt Gingrich announces his Contract with America, which contains a proposal to block grant all child nutrition programs, ending their entitlement status and all nutrition standards. Senate Agriculture Chair Richard Lugar and President Clinton, at the urging of CNF members, reject this proposal.
- 1998 ... CNF supports President Clinton's proposed legislation creating a new entitlement for after school snacks. The legislation is enacted.
- 2010 ... CNF supports President Obama's proposal to expand the after school supper program nationwide and to make other important program administration changes in the Summer Food Program and the Child and Adult Care Food Program. The legislation passes.
- 2011 ... Congress and the Administration agree to massive cuts in programs for low- and moderate-income families as part of the debt ceiling debate, but decide to exclude child nutrition programs from any program cuts. CNF members believe that elected officials did not wish to repeat the mistakes of 1981.
- 2011 ... The National Archives announces a year long exhibit on how government research, campaigns, and policies have affected the food we grow,

purchase and eat, entitled: **What's Cooking, Uncle Sam?** A central feature of the exhibit is a picture of Senators Byrd, Leahy, and other Senators in 1981 consuming a federal reimbursable school lunch meeting the ketchup as a vegetable standards. The lunch consisted of a single slice of white bread, a small portion of protein, 9 French fries, 6 grapes and a 6 ounce glass of milk.

Conclusion

There are a number of methods to engage elected officials in public education activities concerning nutrition policy issues. One of the most effective mechanisms for implementing progressive and positive policy changes affecting school children's nutrition and health is to form broad based public/private partnerships.