

USDA & Dept. of Education partner to feed children better, so they can learn better

By Jon H. Harsch

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Washington, Feb. 11 – As Congress prepares to reauthorize the federal child nutrition programs, on Thursday Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack called for “responding to both the hunger and obesity challenges that we face in this country and making sure that our youngsters are the best learners they possibly could be.”

In a joint appearance with Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Vilsack pointed out that while the recession has ballooned the number of people using food stamps (now called the SNAP program), the school lunch program hasn’t seen a comparable increase. He added that while 31 million schoolchildren in 102,000 schools across the country are signed up for federally subsidized school lunches, the school breakfast program serves only 11 million children in 88,000 schools.



The wife of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, Mrs. Christie Vilsack, has lunch with students at Hebron-Harmon Elementary in Hanover, MD. Photo: USDA

Duncan and Vilsack agreed that lagging participation in the school meals programs is likely due to lack of knowledge about the programs, about who is eligible, and complicated paperwork for signing up. The two Cabinet secretaries agreed on the need for an educational effort so that both parents and school officials understand the programs – and so that more students are able to participate.

Promising “better outreach, better understanding by parents, and an easier process by which to qualify for these programs,” Vilsack said he

hopes the reauthorization legislation this year “will include additional opportunities for direct certification in school so that youngsters who qualify for children’s health insurance programs or the Medicaid program or children whose families qualify for

temporary assistance for needy families will get an automatic qualification for school breakfast and school lunch.”

Duncan welcomed “a new day in terms of the partnership between the Department of Education and USDA.” He said “We think children can’t do their best academically, can’t be successful, can’t frankly begin to concentrate if they’re hungry, and if we don’t do something on the nutrition side, if we don’t do something about physical activity, our children will never be able to be as successful as they could be, as we want them to be, educationally.”

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