



## **Vilsack, Lincoln, & Lugar voice support for expanding USDA's school meals programs**

**By Jon H. Harsch**

© Copyright Agri-Pulse Communications, Inc.

Washington, March 3 – Some 600 food service professionals gasped in unison when Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack recalled a very personal grade school memory: “I was fairly heavy and I remember being ridiculed in fourth grade by my teacher because I couldn’t do a math problem and she linked it to my weight.”

Vilsack’s vivid memory was part of his assurance Wednesday to the School Nutrition Association (SNA) that he fully supports their ambitious goals for this year’s reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act. These goals include boosting participation in the USDA programs which feed over 31 million children daily; helping schools add more nutritious foods to the meals they serve; banning junk food from a la carte lines and school vending machines; and spending less in USDA funds on paperwork and indirect school costs to make more money available for purchasing healthier food.

Vilsack told SNA’s annual Legislative Action Conference that “The reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act is an important opportunity to improve the health of our children and reduce hunger in this country but the federal government cannot do it alone because it’s people who work in our schools that are on the front line of providing healthier meals, nutrition education and enabling more physical activity. I am challenging parents, educators, nutrition experts, and community leaders to join us in doubling the number of HealthierUS Schools across the country in the next year because we all have a stake in improving the health and nutrition of our children.” (For information on USDA’s HealthierUS Schools program, to go: [www.teamnutrition.usda.gov/HealthierUS](http://www.teamnutrition.usda.gov/HealthierUS)).

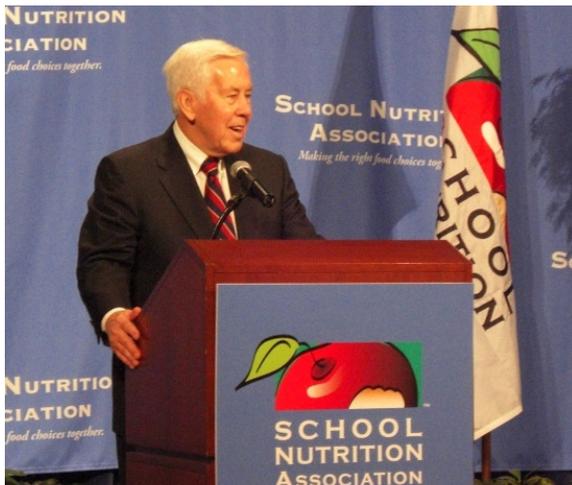
The Obama administration’s proposed fiscal 2011 budget allocates an extra \$1 billion per year to improve the quality of the School Lunch and School Breakfast programs, increase the number of children participating, and ensure schools have the resources they need to make program changes including training for school food service workers, upgraded kitchen equipment, and additional funding for meal reimbursements for schools which improve nutritional value by serving more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products.

Vilsack acknowledged that getting Congress to authorize more spending for school meals will be “a difficult lift . . . in the tough economy, with deficits and the concerns we have about deficits.” But he told the SNA conference that “I’ve always been a believer that you fund your priorities and I believe youngsters, our children, our future, have got to be among our top priorities.” He called on SNA members to “reach across this country to develop the partnerships and the coalitions necessary to really push major legislation through the process.” As for the extra \$1 billion per year, which the administration asked for and Congress rejected last year, Vilsack told *Agri-Pulse* that “This is the right number and it’s an important number in order to get the job done right.”

Also speaking to the SNA conference, Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Blanche Lincoln (D-AR) voiced her full support for a strengthened Child Nutrition Act, saying “it’s critical that we get it done and get it done in a timely way.” She promised to tackle both childhood hunger and childhood obesity when she has her committee begin work on reauthorizing the bill this spring.

Sen. Richard Lugar (R-IN), a former Senate Agriculture Committee Chair, said his long-time support for the federal school meals programs is based on his belief that since children have no choice over which state they grow up in, “we really have a national responsibility for these programs.” But he warned that it will be very difficult to find sufficient votes in Congress this year to increase funding for nutrition programs when any increase is likely to come at the expense of other USDA programs, each one with its own supporters in Congress.

For other *Agri-Pulse* news stories, go to: [www.agri-pulse.com](http://www.agri-pulse.com).



**Sen. Richard Lugar (R-IN) addressing the School Nutrition Association in Washington, DC. Photo: Agri-Pulse.**

#30