

Democrats gear up for school lunch war

By Angelica LaVito

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The school lunch war is back, but this time it's the Democrats going on the offensive.

House Minority Leader [Nancy Pelosi](#) vowed Thursday to do "whatever it takes" to ensure the GOP's child nutrition bill "never sees the light of day on the floor of the House."

Pelosi was one of six Democratic lawmakers to lead advocacy groups in a Capitol Hill rally against the reauthorization bill (H.R. 5003), which would open the door to making federal school meal programs into a block grant - a controversial move that anti-hunger groups believe would fundamentally threaten one of the federal government's most successful nutrition programs.

"This is a moral issue. It isn't even an issue - it's a value," Pelosi said. "We're having a values debate right now with the Republicans. They want to give tax credits to their rich friends and then say, 'We have to balance the budget, so let's take food out of the mouths of babies to do it.' It's just plain wrong."

The lawmakers, who included [Rosa DeLauro](#) (D-Conn.), [Lloyd Doggett](#) (D-Texas), [Jim McGovern](#) (D-Mass.), [Suzanne Bonamici](#) (D-Ore.) and [Bobby Scott](#) (D-Va.), used charged words like "stupid," "mean-spirited" and "mind-boggling" to characterize the legislation, which the House Education and the Workforce Committee approved last month after a contentious markup.

Provisions in the bill, sponsored by Rep. [Todd Rokita](#) (R-Ind.), would also cut the number of schools that could qualify to serve universal free meals by more than a third and relax nutrition standards established in the 2010 Healthy and Hunger-Free Kids Act - a law championed by first lady Michelle Obama.

But the major point of contention for health and advocacy groups is a three-state block grant pilot program, which advocates fear would lead to cuts to nutrition programs and allow states to skirt federal nutrition standards.

The bill has little chance of becoming a law. The Senate has already put together its own bipartisan compromise bill that does not include the block-granting pilot and is broadly backed by health, anti-hunger and school groups, and President Barack Obama would likely veto anything close to the House bill.

Regardless, advocates hope their lobbying effort will deter Republican supporters of the House bill down the road.

"We need to send a strong message so when a bill does come up that does have a chance, lawmakers remember how up in arms advocates were about a bill that didn't have a chance," Tracy Fox, founder of Food, Nutrition and Policy Consultants, said.

SNA with Dems

Thursday's rally represents a significant change in the years-long fight over school lunches, which previously has seen Republicans on the offensive. In 2014, the GOP locked arms with the School Nutrition Association, which represents 55,000 school lunch workers, to push back against the new regulations being backed by the first lady. But the House bill is so divisive it has completely broken the alliance between SNA and House Republicans. Now, instead, SNA has joined forces with Democrats and their public health, anti-hunger and education allies to rapidly mobilize opposition.

"These programs are working," said Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, one of the groups leading the fight. "We're seeing tremendous progress in schools serving healthier food to kids. And so why roll back what's working?"

SNA members have sent more than 9,000 letters and made countless phone calls to Congress opposing the bill, which would cause "irreparable harm to school meal programs," SNA spokeswoman Diane Pratt-Heavner said.

The group will continue to mobilize members at its annual conference next month, she said.

Lori Adkins, a member of the organization's Michigan affiliate and a child nutrition consultant for Oakland schools, said she sees the bill as a "huge threat" to federal child nutrition programs. While SNA has lobbied for more flexibility in school lunch standards, the group is ardently opposed to eliminating the standards altogether.

"Are we going to have 50 types of nutrition standards? Potentially we could," Adkins said. "And districts have worked so hard and so long in implementing, and successful[ly] I might add. We're seeing kids eat fruits and vegetables more than ever before. We're reducing sodium and incorporating more whole grain."

The Food Research and Action Center, an anti-hunger group, has also gotten behind the outreach effort. It dubbed Thursday a "national day of action," urging hundreds of organizations to call their members of Congress. The group organized a sign-on letter opposing the bill in its entirety last month, garnering 750 signatures, and it is organizing another letter campaign opposing the block grant provision, which has more than 1,100 signatures, it said.

At the rally, the group's president, James Weill, called the letter's supporters the "diversity of America that's appalled by this ridiculous idea of dismantling a system that we all know works wonderfully for kids now and does not need to be taken apart at political whim."

CSPI also wrote a letter to House Education and the Workforce Committee leaders charging that the bill would contribute "to the very problems that the programs are designed to address, and we urge the Congress to reconsider these provisions."

That letter gained the signatures of 750 local, state and national organizations.

Heritage Action in bill's corner

No education or nutrition group has come forward in support of the block grant pilot, an idea backed by Heritage Action. The conservative advocacy group has lauded the House Education and the Workforce Committee for advancing the bill, which opens the window to giving states much more control over how they spend federal money, but the group did not respond to questions about whether it's mobilizing support for the legislation.

Heritage Action spokesman Dan Holler told POLITICO last month that the group pressed committee leaders to go further as part of its broader push on Capitol Hill to ensure Republicans are sticking to more conservative principles and showing voters what their "ideal" policies look like.

Rokita has been outspoken in defending his bill. In a [op-ed](#) published in several publications, including The Hill, he said the measure is "being seriously mischaracterized by ideologues whose ultimate goal is universal government feeding" and called it a "major step forward in making sure an appropriate safety net exists and that the nutrition standards are revised so that school food is more edible"

The three-term congressman has repeatedly emphasized that the bill doesn't cut funding or kick eligible children out of the free or reduced meals programs.

"Our proposal responsibly continues to offer a safety net for children in *actual* need and returns power to local leaders and parents," Rokita wrote. "Unfortunately, those attacking this bill don't approve when we can do all of this without spending more of your money or making free people more dependent on government overseers."

Tyler Hernandez, a spokesman for the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, further defended the bill in a statement emailed to POLITICO.

"This legislation includes positive reforms that will improve nutrition assistance for children, families, and taxpayers, like making it easier for kids in rural and low-income areas to access healthy meals during the summer, providing schools more support to serve kids a nutritious breakfast, and delivering states and schools more flexibility to better serve students," Hernandez wrote. "These are the reforms short-sighted critics are threatening to defeat merely because three states would be able to explore new ways to improve nutrition support for vulnerable children and families."

But in the Congressional Visitor's Center where the rally was held, speakers invoked the ghost of Newt Gingrich's 1995 attempt to turn the entire school nutrition program into a block grant, reminding attendees of how intense opposition killed that idea.

Advocacy groups and lawmakers opposed to the bill are again preparing for an intense battle, working to ensure the bill does not come to the floor and to persuade House Republicans to simply "forget about it," as DeLauro put it.

Added Rep. Jim McGovern: "If speaker Ryan is looking for a fight, we're willing to take them on."

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