



2010 Dietary Guidelines Committee Comments of Action for Healthy Kids

January 29, 2009 – Washington, DC

Good afternoon. My name is Rob Bisceglie, and I am executive director of Action for Healthy Kids. Action for Healthy Kids is a national, grassroots non-profit organization focused on addressing the epidemic of overweight, undernourished and sedentary youth by improving nutrition and physical activity in schools. Our public-private partnership involves more than 60 national partner organizations and government agencies representing education, health, nutrition and fitness. Through a network of state-based Teams across the country we have mobilized more than 11,000 volunteers to help schools positively change the school environment so kids are fit, healthy and ready to learn.

We commend the work that the Dietary Guidelines Committee is undertaking, and we welcome the opportunity to provide input to these deliberations. I will confine my remarks today to two primary points. The first is related to the importance of nutrition, specifically breakfast, as well as physical activity to learning, and the second to the importance of stressing foods of high nutrient density.

First, as documented in the Action For Healthy Kids report, "The Learning Connection," there is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that children who eat poorly or who engage in too little physical activity do not perform as well as they could academically. Conversely, it has been shown that improvements in nutrition and physical activity can result in improvements in academic performance. In a study published just last year of more than 5,000 children, an association was observed across multiple indicators of diet quality with academic performance (Florence, Asbridge, & Veugelers. Diet Quality and Academic Performance. *Journal of School Health* 78(4): 209).

This relationship has been particularly well documented when it comes to breakfast eating. Omitting breakfast can interfere with learning even in well-nourished children. Numerous studies, reviews and position papers, many referenced in "The Learning Connection," have found that increased participation in School Breakfast Programs is associated with better academic test scores, daily attendance and class participation, and it also has been linked to reductions in absences and tardiness.

We urge this Committee to consider incorporating a recommendation that urges school age children to eat a healthy breakfast each day. Given the reach and influence that this Committee has in shaping dietary behaviors of the public, the ramifications of this recommendation would be significant. Not only would it send a strong message to parents and caregivers, but it also would help reinforce the value and benefits of important feeding programs like School Breakfast. We have demonstrated that participation in such programs can be enhanced with relatively small financial investments. For example, the Ohio Action for Healthy Kids has distributed \$25,000 annually in school breakfast mini-grants, ranging from \$500-\$1,000 to provide schools with funds for school breakfast programs start-up, expansion, and marketing/promotion. As a result of the mini-grant funds and the associated technical assistance, school breakfast participation in Ohio increased 15% in 13 months. In our experience, the return on investment

for breakfast initiatives makes them a wise dedication of time, energy and resources. We believe that this Committee will have a tough time identifying other simple, actionable, affordable pieces of dietary guidance that have the potential impact of this simple recommendation: “Everyone should eat a good breakfast.”

Similarly, we hope this group will reinforce the position of the 2005 Dietary Guidelines Committee, and more recently, the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, that physical activity plays a profound role in health. Although physical activity is separate from diet, the two are inextricably linked in terms of overall well being. Just as nutrition has been linked to academic performance, so has physical activity. Findings from a variety of studies detailed in our “Learning Connection” report have found that physical activity supports learning and cognitive function. Schools that offer intense physical activity programs have seen positive effects on academic performance and achievement, including improved mathematics, reading and writing test scores, and less disruptive behavior, even when the added physical education time takes away from class time for academics. Again, we hope the Committee will reinforce this relationship between physical activity and learning in its final report.

My second main point relates the continued need to encourage consumption of nutrient dense foods. We are particularly concerned about the disproportionate effect of poor nutrition in low income communities. We continue to seek best practices on ways of reaching – through schools, communities and parent groups – youth who are malnourished, sedentary and overweight. To the extent that we can deliver positive messages about foods to encourage, specifically fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low/nonfat dairy, and that we can deliver culturally appropriate and good tasting foods from those categories to youth in these settings, we believe we can make a meaningful difference in lifelong eating patterns. Our experience tells us that positive emphasis on nutrient dense foods will have greater impact than will negative messages focusing primarily on food avoidance. We in the public health community at times are too quick to tell people what to not eat, rather than advising about – and in the case of schools, providing – good tasting and accessible alternatives.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our thoughts with you.