

## Sam Farr: School nutrition program about improving children's lives

By Sam Farr Guest commentary

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As a the top Democrat on the subcommittee that funds the school lunch program and the author of an amendment that prevented an attempt to gut the healthier standards, I wanted to respond to Sunday's editorial unfairly attacking the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. Let's be clear, the program's only goals are to make sure our tax dollars are not wasted on junk food in the schools and that every student has access to a healthy meal.

Its purpose is not to stop bake sales as the editorial wrongly implied. Furthermore, the new law does not outlaw birthday celebrations. Children are still free to bring in treats to share with their friends. So rest easy, parents, your child will not have to explain that birthday cupcake to a federal agent as opponents of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act have falsely claimed over and over again.

In fact, the new standards do exactly what the editorial called for. It is not a specified menu for every school to follow. Instead, they give the states and the school districts the flexibility necessary to meet the new nutrition goals — that includes determining how often bake sales are held. Some states have decided to allow sugary treats at bake sales while others have opted not to, but they make that choice, not the federal government.

What the editorial failed to mention was the overwhelming success of the new law was in the first year. Over 90 percent of the schools have successfully implemented the new nutrition standards. The USDA, the department that oversees the program, is now working on a case-by-case basis with the schools that are having trouble meeting them. Just the other week, the peer-reviewed Childhood Obesity journal published a study that said the majority of students actually prefer the healthier meals.

As the editorial stated, the childhood obesity epidemic is a serious issue. This is the first generation of children who will live shorter, less healthy lives than their parents. Our schools should not contribute to that legacy. However, there is not a lack of leadership to address the problem. First lady Michelle Obama made fighting the epidemic her signature issue. Her Let's Move! campaign brought the problem to the forefront and the nation responded to her call for action. For the first time in decades, we are finally reversing childhood obesity rates in this country and the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act has played an important role in fighting the epidemic. That is why it has the support of child nutrition advocates, pediatricians, military leaders like Mission Readiness, and the former presidents of the School Nutrition Association.

More importantly parents support the healthier standards. They want to know that we are not wasting money serving unhealthy junk to their kids. Just as they demand their tax dollars are spent on quality teachers and resources for the classroom, they also want to know those same dollars are going toward quality food served in the lunchroom.

Parents understand that the investments we make now in improving our children's health will have huge payoffs in the future. Any progress made on reversing the obesity epidemic will help drive down health care costs. It will allow us to chip away at the \$190 billion a year we spend on obesity-related conditions.

A healthy nation leads to a healthy national economy — and a healthy local economy. The nutritious foods that kids need to fuel their education are grown right here on the Central Coast. Schools should be looking

at ways to get more locally sourced food into our lunchrooms and not focus primarily on purchasing processed food from a vendor.

This success in reversing the childhood obesity epidemic only continues if we keep investing in smart, healthy programs like the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. This historical piece of legislation isn't about cupcakes or bake sales as the editorial suggested. It's about improving the lives of our nation's school children, and that is something all of us should support.