

*PA Senate Policy Committee
Hearing on Whole Milk in Schools
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Good morning, respective members of the Pennsylvania Senate Policy Committee and guests. Thank you for inviting me to be part of today's hearing. My testimony will focus on three areas: the health benefits of milk, the role of school milk in building lifelong milk drinking habits, and the impact additional whole milk sales could have on the marketplace.

Milk has long been recognized as nature's most nearly perfect food. In fact, milk is the best food source for Calcium, Potassium and Vitamin D, three of the four "nutrients of public health concern" — which are nutrients that many Americans, including children, are most lacking in their diets. It is also an excellent source of Vitamin B12, Vitamin A, Riboflavin, Phosphorus and Niacin. Research shows that regardless of fat content, dairy foods like milk, cheese and yogurt are associated with improved bone health, especially in children and teens, and reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes, and lower blood pressure in adults.

For decades, nutrition guidelines have recommended only low-fat dairy products for everyone over the age of two because of concerns about saturated fat levels in milk. However, in recent years, scientists have called that recommendation into question. Recent studies suggest that skim might not always be the healthiest option when it comes to milk. Although whole milk has higher calories in it from the fat, it also has higher naturally-occurring levels of other nutrients – including Vitamin D and Omega-3 fatty acids. Omega-3 fatty acids have been linked to many health benefits, including improved heart and brain health and a lower risk of cancer. The more fat a cup of milk has in it, the higher its omega-3 content.

Also, an article from National Dairy Council cites a growing body of scientific evidence disputing any health concerns around whole milk. In fact, there is a growing consensus that whole milk is actually healthy, not harmful. This research indicates that dairy foods, regardless of fat content, have a neutral association with risk for cardiovascular health. In fact, two clinical trials published in 2016 found no differences in heart disease or Type 2 Diabetes risk factors when eating whole milk, cheese and yogurt versus eating lower-fat varieties of these foods. This may be due to one or more unique characteristics of the dairy food group, including its combination of nine essential nutrients, dairy fat's unique fatty acid profile, and how the structure of dairy interacts with other foods.

Regardless of fat levels, the bottom line is that milk should be an essential part of the diet, particularly in school aged children, because of its unique blend of nutrients. Recent studies indicate that we face a Calcium crisis in this country, with fewer than 1 in 10 girls and 1 in 3 boys getting enough Calcium in their diets by the age of 12. Milk with a fuller fat profile tastes better than nonfat milk, and if kids must choose between nonfat milk and another better tasting but less nutritious beverage, they will choose the less nutritious beverage. This is the main reason why having fuller fat milk options available in school is so important. When sugary drinks and water replaces milk consumption, these children miss out on the nutrient powerhouse that milk offers to them.

Recent sales data supports consumer preferences around whole milk. USDA data shows whole milk sales increasing 12 percent from 2014 to 2019. Flavored whole milk has also increased year-over-year and is up 36 percent since 2015. These increases occurred over a period when fluid milk sales in total were in a steady decline.

The truth is that offering fuller fat milk in school could mean the difference between a child developing a lifelong milk drinking habit or not. It's that simple – children need to have good tasting milk available at school or they simply will not drink it. And if they do not drink it at school, they are less likely to drink it at home. If they do not drink it as a child, they are also much less likely to include it in their nutritional habits as an adult and are less likely to encourage their families to drink it. Not drinking milk as a child can lead to health issues later in life, including increased risk of osteoporosis, hypertension, obesity, and cancer. One study showed that three things made the biggest difference in getting children to consume fluid milk. Those included making milk more appealing to children, having schools include milk in their meal plans, and increasing the types of milk available at school.

In addition to serving as director of the Center for Dairy Excellence, I also come at this issue as a mother of three boys. My youngest son is now 14 and never liked the milk at school. When he was in seventh grade, his science teacher encouraged students to pick a topic they were passionate about and conduct a science experiment around that topic. My son decided to do a taste test between nonfat chocolate milk and fuller fat chocolate milk with his friends at school. He had 27 different classmates blindly sample the nonfat chocolate milk and the fuller fat chocolate milk. Every single one of them preferred the fuller fat chocolate milk.

Processors would tell you that is because it is very difficult to formulate a good tasting nonfat chocolate milk because the nonfat milk leaves the cocoa tasting almost bitter. It is easier to formulate good tasting whole and reduced fat chocolate milks, but the nonfat chocolate milk is much more challenging. Like I said earlier, the fat in milk improves the flavor profile, whether it is plain white milk or flavored.

The last point I want to touch on is the impact that offering fuller fat milk in schools could potentially have on the marketplace. Currently the US dairy industry exports about 16 percent of our milk supply. However, most of the products we send overseas are nonfat and skim-based products. According to the US Dairy Export Council, the U.S. is relatively balanced in milkfat, with domestic consumption of milkfat at roughly 97 percent of production. Essentially, nearly all the milkfat produced in the U.S. stays in the U.S. That is not the case with the skim stream. Domestic consumption of skim solids only accounts for 80 percent of production. If we move more nonfat milk sales to whole milk sales, we will need additional milk to supply the domestic milkfat needs, which could potentially increase demand. Basic economics would say that could have a positive impact on dairy producer prices in general.

Before I close, I want to mention that the school lunch program is authorized by the USDA and is a federally-mandated program. School food service directors have the difficult job of balancing the school lunch tray to meet the requirements set forth by the USDA. If they don't meet those requirements, they risk losing financial support for their school district.

The other thing to keep in mind is that fuller fat milk costs more than nonfat milk, so for some school districts, it is also a financial issue. In PMMB's latest bulletin, a ½ pint of whole milk was listed at about five cents more per unit than a ½ pint of nonfat milk. When every penny counts, that additional five cents could mean several thousands of dollars difference for a school food service director who is trying not only to balance the lunch tray, but to balance their budget as well.

At the end of the day, this issue is much broader than just whole milk. About 75 percent of the milk sold in schools is in the form of flavored milk, while the other 25 percent is white. In 2018, USDA issued an emergency waiver to allow schools to offer 1 percent chocolate and 2 percent white milk, in addition to nonfat milk, to improve school milk consumption. Unfortunately, that waiver is set to expire this fall, and if there are no actions to extend it, schools will no longer be able to offer these fuller fat options. That will mean fewer types of milk for students to choose from and less school milk consumption in general. It would mean fewer kids would be getting the nutrition they can only get from milk's powerful punch of nine essential nutrients. It could also lead to fewer kids developing those lifelong milk drinking habits that are so critical to their health and development.