Dear Chairs Murray, Heinrich, Granger, and Harris, and Ranking Members Collins, Hoeven, DeLauro, and Bishop:

As you finalize the fiscal year (FY) 2024 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies spending bill, the undersigned organizations urge you to oppose the rider that excludes cheese from the updated sodium reduction goals for school meals (Sec. 773 in the Senate; Sec. 766 in the House). This rider limits the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)’s ability to implement science-based sodium targets for school meals to protect and improve children’s health.

Earlier this year, the USDA issued a proposed rule to strengthen nutrition standards consistent with the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans ("Child Nutrition Programs: Revisions to Meal Patterns Consistent With the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans"). The proposed rule would...
reduce sodium by 20 percent in school breakfasts and 30 percent in school lunches through a series of two-year 10 percent reductions through 2030. The proposed sodium limits apply to an entire meal averaged over the course of the week, allowing schools to balance higher sodium meals with lower sodium meals throughout the week. That ensures that schools can still serve a saltier cheesy pizza or cheeseburger one day, and a not-so-salty entrée the next, which already gives dairy companies the flexibility to sell schools anything from Swiss cheese (a lower sodium cheese) to feta (one of the saltiest cheeses).

These evidence-based updates to the sodium allowed in school meals are critical. Nine out of ten children in the U.S. consume too much sodium, which is linked to high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. Currently, one in six children have raised blood pressure. A recent study modeling the impacts of strengthening school nutrition standards showed that updating the sodium limits has the largest potential health and economic benefits compared to any other nutritional change.¹

The proposed rule is feasible both for schools and the food industry. The USDA considers challenges faced by school nutrition programs, including those attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, in aligning school meals with the Dietary Guidelines. The requirements are gradually phased in over multiple years and involve an additional $100 million investment to help schools improve the nutritional quality of school meals. Many schools have already reduced sodium beyond USDA’s requirements. Cheese manufacturers have already created and sell cheeses that would meet the goals in the proposed rule.² The proactive response from schools and industry is terrific progress since cheese is one of the top foods that contribute to excess sodium in children’s diets.³

The cheese carveout rider requires the USDA to develop a special exemption for the sodium in cheese used for “food safety and functional purposes” from the overall meal standards. If the USDA does not include this exemption, the rider prevents the USDA from implementing the updated sodium limits in the proposed rule and either freezes current sodium reduction levels (Senate rider) or rolls back current sodium reduction levels to previous targets (House rider). The impact of this rider would halt sodium reduction entirely for all school foods until cheese gets special treatment. Further, if the amount of sodium that the USDA determines allowable for “food safety and functional purposes” is too high, schools could serve more cheese and more types of saltier cheeses, negating the purpose of overall sodium reduction in the meals program.

**In conclusion, we urge you to strike the rider that carves out cheese from the proposed sodium limits for school meals.**

Sincerely,

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
Advocates for Better Children's Diets
Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, Inc
American Heart Association
Association of Black Cardiologists
Association of State Public Health Nutritionists
Balanced
California Association of Food Banks
Center for Digital Democracy
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Chef Ann Foundation
Coalition for Healthy School Food
Colorado Children's Campaign
FARE (Food Allergy Research and Education)
Friends of the Earth
Healthy Food America
Healthy School Food Maryland
Healthy Schools Campaign
Jump IN for Healthy Kids
National Association of Chronic Disease Directors (NACDD)
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National Education Association
National WIC Association
Nebraska Appleseed
North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition
Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition
NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine
Public Health Institute
Seventh Generation Interfaith Coalition for Responsible Investments
Society of Behavioral Medicine
The Praxis Project