

Child nutrition bill stalls in House

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Writer



First lady Michelle Obama, center, Colombian First lady Maria Clemencia Rodriguez De Santos, second from right, and Haitian First lady Elisabeth D. Preval, take a tour of an herb garden at the Stone Barns Center with Executive Chef Dan Barber, left, and local school children during a luncheon with the spouses of chiefs of state attending United Nations General Assembly, Friday, Sept. 24, 2010 in Tarrytown, N.Y. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)

(AP) -- First lady Michelle Obama's campaign for healthier school lunches has stalled in Congress after anti-hunger groups and more than 100 Democrats protested the use of food stamp dollars to pay for it.

Passage of the child nutrition bill, which would improve lunches in schools and expand feeding programs for low-income students, has been a priority for Democrats and hunger groups for years. But the groups and many members of the House switched sides when leaders proposed a vote on a Senate-passed version of the legislation that uses future

funding for food stamp programs to pay for part of the \$4.5 billion cost.

One hundred and six Democrats wrote House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., in August calling the move egregious, saying it was not a vote they would take lightly. Labor unions, anti-poverty groups and even New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg also urged the speaker to reconsider using the food stamp money.

"It's just plain wrong," said Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., a longtime advocate for childhood nutrition programs. "The way you are going to pay for a child nutrition bill is by dipping into people's [food stamps](#)? Give me a break."

The first lady has lobbied aggressively for the legislation as part of her "Let's Move" campaign to combat [childhood obesity](#). A spokeswoman for Mrs. Obama said Wednesday that she had "made extensive outreach" to Pelosi and other members of House leadership over the past several weeks.

To no avail. Democrats declined to take up the bill before the November elections, citing many of their members' concerns about the food stamp dollars. Many Republicans opposed the bill as well, saying it was too expensive.

Supporters had hoped to pass the bill before Thursday, when many of the [child nutrition programs](#) in the bill are scheduled to expire. An extension of those programs was included in a stopgap bill that will keep the government operating for the next two months, and supporters will try again to pass the nutrition bill when Congress returns to Washington after the elections.

If passed, the new nutrition standards would not remove popular foods like hamburgers from schools completely, but would make them

healthier, using leaner meat or whole wheat buns, for example. Vending machines could be stocked with less candy and fewer high-calorie drinks.

Creation of new standards, which public health advocates have sought for a decade, has unprecedented support from many of the nation's largest food and beverage companies. The two sides came together on the issue as public pressure to remove junk foods from schools increased.

Congressional passage of the bill would be only the first step. Decisions on what kinds of foods could be sold - and what ingredients may be limited - would be left up to the Agriculture Department.

Supporters said they were hopeful the bill could be passed after the elections. McGovern said he was working with the White House to find a new way to pay for it.

Jim Weill, president of the Food Research and Action Center, said he doesn't buy the argument that the House should use the food stamp money for child nutrition because it will just be used for something else. Lawmakers have been eyeing the dollars for other priorities if it isn't used for the bill.

"If people fight back, it's not inevitable," Weill said.

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