

**Testimony in Support of H. 446, An Act Relative to Student Nutrition & Wellness
October 28, 2009**

Chairman and other members of the Panel, I wish to offer testimony to you in support of the bill **H. 446, An Act Relative to Student Nutrition & Wellness**. This bill incorporates two previously distinct bills that focused on Healthy School Meals and Physical Education. The resulting legislation provides Massachusetts with the tools to oversee and enforce new federal school nutrition, wellness and physical education requirements. Additionally, it ensures community participation to adequately respond to the needs of each individual school district.

In recent years, public health studies have revealed that an alarming number of children across the country, and especially in Massachusetts, are dangerously overweight - between 25-30% of Massachusetts' children 10-17 years old are overweight or obese. These studies also assert that overweight children have emotional and mental setbacks – from severe depression to social adjustment issues, especially because overweight children are 70% more likely than their normal weight counterparts to be overweight as adults.

The Federal government implores states to combat this epidemic and **H. 446** must be Massachusetts' response. Federal legislation requires each state to incorporate the 2005 USDA Dietary Guidelines into their own legislation by creating a wellness policy. According to federal law, this is a one time only requirement with little oversight, less enforcement and no collaborative role for state departments of education and departments of public health. **H. 446** goes beyond these threshold promulgations and attempts to benefit from already existing State Departments. This bill would call on local communities to create permanent standing School Wellness Advisory Committees. Individual school districts around the state will create wellness committees comprised of teachers, parents, and other community members. Every city and town of Massachusetts is made up of distinct ethnic, socioeconomic and cultural populations, and local wellness communities will best be able to respond to unique local needs.

At a minimum, these Wellness Committees will be charged with ensuring that local schools begin working towards Federal Healthy School Meals Programs. This bill calls for a Pilot Rewards for Healthy School Meals Program that allows eligible school districts to apply for financial rewards and grants to bring healthy school meals into school lunchrooms. The wellness policy would have to be reviewed and approved by the Massachusetts Departments of Education and Public Health. School Wellness Advisory Committees would be required to review the wellness policy every three years and make appropriate changes following advancements in technology and nutrition standards. These standards include but are not limited to physical education requirements, training for food services staff, supporting safe routes to schools, which encourages children to walk and bicycle to school, nutrition education and an emphasis on serving fresh foods from local and community farms and gardens.

This bill will incorporate legislation that requires Physical Education for Grades K-12. Statistics reveal that only approximately 25 % of students in Massachusetts participate in daily PE classes. This sets the stage for future negative attitudes about physical activity. This bill requires Physical education classes that shall not be less than 150 minutes per week at the elementary level and 225 in middle and high school levels.

In the end, this legislation asks little more than enabling local school districts to take the problem of childhood obesity seriously, to have a wide range of qualified individuals working together to address the problem and implement solutions to it, and to finally allow Massachusetts to join other states that respond satisfactorily to recent federal mandates to require wellness, nutrition and physical education into public schools. **H. 446** takes a positive step forward to address this important issue in Massachusetts. I thank you for your consideration and respectfully ask you to report this legislation favorably.