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Healthier School Lunch Choices: A Worthy Investment for West Virginia

Charleston, WV - Public officials are tasked with ensuring programs are efficiently using public dollars while maximizing services. As budgets tighten, these programs are vetted under extreme scrutiny to determine worth. Due to elections, most elected officials look for the quickest return on investments when prioritizing initiatives. Policies that take years to reach fruition are often overlooked; voters expect results now. As attention spans have decreased and expectations have risen, it has resulted in policies becoming shorter sighted. A shining example that did not contemplate future consequences was the decision to take fresh, healthy foods out of our school systems.

Given the recent discussions surrounding the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA), we must examine practices within West Virginia state agencies that are contributing to the rise of healthcare costs in West Virginia. This is paramount as our state budget continues to grow despite agencies seeing cuts year after year. Services within these entities are being pushed to the wayside to pay for the increase cost of caring for our citizens. Therefore, the state's health care bill is putting a strain on all government agencies. Obesity, the drug epidemic and an aging population are the main contributors for the inflated burden.

Elected officials are already focused on combating the drug epidemic, while attracting young people to the state to replace our older generations in the workforce. However, the same effort is not being put towards to solving the rising obesity crisis in the Mountain State. Policies implemented in the past have created an artificial preference for processed foods at state institutions. This is due to a decision to rid

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schools of actual kitchens and the cooks who staffed them. In lieu of this, schools opt for highly processed foods that can be heated and served instead of prepared, fresh. The healthier food options have been replaced with high sugar, low-nutritional value counterparts contributing to some of the worst health issues in the nation. In what looked to be a small savings at the time, in reality has had dire consequences on our population.

According to the Pew Charitable Trusts, children consume up to 50 percent of their daily calories at school. At the same time, obesity rates have risen 4.5% in the last 20 years, according to the CDC and Prevention's National Health Nutrition Examination Survey. This clearly shows, obesity is an increasing problem for our children. A study, *New School Meal Regulations Increase Fruit Consumption and Do Not Increase Total Plate Waste*, found when kids were given healthier choices, they ate more food while throwing less away. *School Lunch Quality and Academic Performance* found a modest increase in tests scores of children whose lunches were replaced with healthier options. We can see that the food served in our schools has a huge correlation to overall health and academic performance of students.

As health care costs continue to rise, our state has an opportunity to right the wrongs of the past. We need to focus on future generations, instilling healthy habits at an early age. This must include expanding opportunities for state institutions to source healthier, local foods from West Virginia farmers. Current practices clearly have costed the state more money in the long run, as well as taking economic opportunities from the local producer. If we can reverse course, the state will see a drop in health care costs while creating opportunities for economic growth. We should no longer continue to make decisions based on short term savings without considering long term consequences. At the end of the day, our children deserve better and this is simply the right thing to do for West Virginia.

Sources:

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Kent A. Leonhardt
West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture

The West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials who sits on the Board of Public Works.

