

Bill would reduce number of free school meals

By Mary Clare Jalonick, AP

WASHINGTON – House Republicans last week weighed legislation that could lower the number of students receiving free and reduced-price meals at school.

Legislation debated by the House Education and Workforce Committee aims to save money by scaling back the number of schools in which all students receive free or reduced meals. It would also help schools that say the Obama administration's healthier meal rules are too restrictive and not appealing enough to students.

A proposed Republican amendment to the bill would go even further, allowing a trial period of so-called block grants for school meals in three states. That would mean those states wouldn't receive unlimited federal dollars for students who qualify for the free and reduced-price lunches.

Hunger and nutrition advocates from the American Academy of Pediatrics to the American Heart Association have sharply criticized the legislation.

"The bill would significantly weaken access to healthy, nutritious foods for our nation's children," said Benard Dreyer, president of the pediatrics group.

The block grant provision, included in an amendment by Rep. Todd Rokita of Indiana, even prompted opposition from the School Nutrition Association, which has called for major changes in the school meal standards put in place in recent years and championed by first lady Michelle Obama.

The group, which represents school nutrition directors and the

companies that sell food to schools, called the block grant idea "reckless" and said it would be a first step toward eliminating the federal guarantee that all children have access to the nutrition they need at school.

Republicans said the changes would help save money while ensuring that those with the highest need are still guaranteed meals. The committee was scheduled to vote on the amendment and the overall bill on Wednesday.

Republicans, including Rokita and committee chairman John Kline of Minnesota, said the changes would help save money while ensuring that those with the highest need are still guaranteed meals. The bill would raise the threshold for a government program called community eligibility, in which schools in districts with high poverty rates can provide free meals to all students at the school.

Republicans said it would better target taxpayer money by scaling back free meals for the some of the students that attend those high-poverty schools, but don't qualify for free or reduced meals. They noted that the bill also provides an increase in federal reimbursements for school breakfasts.

"This is hardly unreasonable and it's hardly unfair," said Rokita.

The bill would allow a wider variety of foods to be sold in lunch lines, an attempt to provide flexibility to schools that have complained that the Obama administration's standards are too strict.

Democrats objected to the efforts to save money on school meals and to loosen the nutrition standards. Virginia Rep. Bobby Scott, the top Democrat on the panel, said the bill would "cut budgets instead of feeding our children."

The partisan split on the House panel was in contrast to a bipartisan Senate compromise. With the support of Democrats,

the GOP-led Senate Agriculture Committee passed legislation in January that would ease requirements for whole grains in school meals and delay a deadline to cut sodium levels. The House bill goes much further.

The healthier school meal rules that have been phased in since 2012 and set fat, sugar and sodium limits on foods in the lunch line and beyond. They require more whole grains, fruits and vegetables.

Schools have long been required to follow government nutrition rules if they accept federal reimbursements for free and reduced-price meals for low-income students, but the new standards are stricter.