

# Lincoln's child-nutrition bill clears House

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WASHINGTON — The House on Thursday approved a sweeping \$4.5 billion child-nutrition bill aimed at expanding school feeding programs and improving the food they serve at the same time it combats childhood obesity.

By a vote of 258-156, the House adopted the Senate version of the legislation, which was sponsored by Arkansas Sen. Blanche Lincoln, a Democrat who is chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee.

The vote came a day later than originally scheduled. On Wednesday, House Democratic leaders unexpectedly pulled the measure after Republicans sought to amend it — a move that would have sent it back to the Senate, where chances for consideration were uncertain.

But the bill came back to the floor Thursday, where House members approved the same version as the Senate. It now goes to President Barack Obama for his signature.

“Passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act puts us on a path toward improving the

health of the next generation of Americans, providing common-sense solutions to tackling childhood hunger and obesity,” Lincoln said in a statement issued after the vote. “This bill ensures that our children will receive healthier, more nutritious meals and removes the red tape that prevents so many from participating in nutrition programs.”

Among Arkansas' House members, only Republican Rep. John Boozman opposed the bill in the final vote. Two of the state's three Democratic members — Reps. Vic Snyder and Mike Ross — voted for the legislation. Rep. Marion Berry, who issued a statement calling the bill “an important effort in expanding and raising the standard of food we provide all Americans,” did not vote because he was en route to New Orleans for a previous commitment.

Boozman, who defeated Lincoln in the Nov. 2 election, issued a statement criticizing the way the measure was handled, saying Democratic leaders had short-circuited the standard legislative process by bringing up the Senate version

of the bill, an effort “to force partisan priorities through the political process.”

Before Thursday's final vote, Democratic Rep. George Miller of California acknowledged the political situation: “We know we must take the Senate bill” in order to pass child-nutrition legislation before the end of the current session of Congress.

As Miller explained, not enough time remained for the House to consider its own bill because it would then have to be reconciled with the Senate version, and both chambers would have to approve the compromise bill.

But Republican senators this week said they would not consider any measures other than tax-cut extensions or government funding. So House Democratic leaders offered the Senate version of the child-nutrition bill.

Up to this point in the legislative process, the child-nutrition bill had enjoyed bipartisan backing. During the floor debate, Republicans echoed Boozman's view that House members had been denied a role in shaping the bill because it had not been subject to the

regular legislative process.

To pay for a portion of the child-nutrition bill, senators used \$2.2 billion that was originally set for future increases in food-stamp funding that was provided under the 2009 economic-stimulus plan.

As a result, some anti-hunger lawmakers and organizations, such as the Food Research and Action Center, said they would oppose the bill if funding were diverted from food stamps. That pressure led to a pledge from the Obama administration to find a way to replace the food stamp funding, an issue that came up Tuesday during a conference call with House Democratic leaders.

Democratic Rep. James McGovern of Massachusetts, co-chairman of the House Hunger Caucus along with Boozman, told reporters that cuts to future food stamp spending “don't make a lot of sense to me.”

On the same call, Lincoln, a co-founder of the Senate Hunger Caucus, cited U.S. Department of Agriculture studies showing there are “more than 500,000 Arkansans living in food insecurity,” meaning their access to adequate food is lim-

ited by lack of money and other resources. At the same time, she added, the state has one of the highest rates of childhood obesity.

The bill is designed to increase participation in existing food programs, improve the nutritional quality of school lunches and help reduce childhood obesity. It would strengthen federal nutrition standards, which currently apply only to school lunches and breakfasts. The bill would allow setting standards for foods sold anywhere on school grounds, including vending machines and cafeteria a la carte lines.

The legislation has become a central element of first lady Michelle Obama's campaign against childhood obesity. The bill also includes an increase in the reimbursement rate schools receive for providing meals — the first such increase since 1973.