

Rachael Ray and Senator Lobby for School Lunch

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WASHINGTON — [Rachael Ray](#)'s signature smile evaporated during a car ride to the Capitol on Tuesday. None of her trademark catchphrases — “Yum-o” or “fantabulous” — tumbled from her mouth.

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Brendan Smialowski for The New York Times

Rachael Ray, center, the chef, with Senators Robert P. Casey Jr. of Pennsylvania and Kirsten E. Gillibrand of New York.

Instead, she grimaced, leaned in and sounded off about the federal [Child Nutrition Act](#) and what she considers to be the government's stingy reimbursement rates for school lunches. “Ridiculous,” she said.

“How could you go to any state in the union and say you are not for an extra couple of cents to eradicate hunger, to make our kids healthier, stronger, better focused?” she said. “It doesn't make any sense that you would even have to have a long conversation about that, to me.”

As New York's junior senator, [Kirsten E. Gillibrand](#), tries to squeeze billions of extra dollars for public school lunch programs into a pinched budget, she is relying on a powerful and garrulous megaphone: Ms. Ray.

Or as the master of the 30-minute meal said repeatedly, “I am using my big Sicilian mouth.”

For four hours, Ms. Gillibrand unleashed the celebrity chef, cookbook author and talk show host to lobby lawmakers on the reauthorization of the nutrition act, which determines how much money schools are given for meals and how much control

regulators can exercise over food outside of cafeterias, like the sugary snacks sold in vending machines.

Ms. Gillibrand and Ms. Ray argue that the reimbursement rate should be bumped up by 70 cents a child. That figure is unlikely to fly in the current budget, but they said they would settle for a smaller increase. (The current bill would increase reimbursements by 6 cents to \$2.74, from \$2.68.)

Another goal is a ban on [trans fats](#) in school cafeterias. The Agriculture Committee, on which Ms. Gillibrand, a Democrat, sits, has balked, but she plans to force the issue with an amendment on the Senate floor. The Senate is likely to vote on the legislation this summer.

Ms. Ray, 41, who grew up in Ms. Gillibrand's former Congressional district in northeast New York State, has made school nutrition something of a personal crusade. She has helped the New York City school system develop a healthier menu, creating a chicken taco dish for cafeterias using a whole wheat flatbread, roasted chicken and a ratatouille-style stew. Her latest coup was persuading the city's schools to use whole wheat pasta in macaroni and cheese.

In meetings with senators, Ms. Ray pressed her case in a polite but firm manner, repeatedly expressing consternation over Congress's inability to find extra money. "Six cents is not enough," she told Senator [Debbie Stabenow](#), Democrat of Michigan. "What can I do to help?"

At times, Ms. Ray's star power seemed to have its desired affect. "I really enjoy your show," said Representative George Miller, Democrat of California.

Senator [Tom Harkin](#), Democrat of Iowa, spent the first five minutes of his meeting with Ms. Ray discussing his favorite recipes and grocery stores (Whole Foods, followed by Trader Joe's).

Lawmakers seemed to appreciate Ms. Ray's conviction and activism. "She can reach people in a way we can't on C-Span," said Senator Amy Klobuchar, Democrat of Minnesota. "When we start talking about waistlines and vending machines, having somebody who has the reach that she has is a lot more appealing than a hearing room with no windows. She has a window onto the world."

As she darted across the sprawling Capitol complex, Ms. Ray seemed to regret her decision to wear open-toed high heels. "Better shoes," she said to herself, as if making a checklist for her next lobbying session.

The nutrition bill has taken on a personal dimension for Ms. Gillibrand as well. A mother of two, she has spoken candidly about her own efforts to lose weight.

Since the birth of her son Henry, about two years ago, Ms. Gillibrand has turned heads by quickly shedding pounds.

She has carefully stuck to a diet of fruits and vegetables, lean meat and fish. She says she writes down just about everything she eats. Her menu on Tuesday was whole wheat toast for breakfast and yogurt for lunch.

“Like all women who have children,” she said in an interview, “I have been very attentive to good nutrition, and good eating habits, and exercising, so I could lose my baby weight.”

Ms. Gillibrand’s outspoken support of higher financing has won her plaudits from child hunger and anti-obesity activists, who said she has spotlighted an issue that is likely to be overlooked in an era of falling revenues and budget cuts.

“For a new member, it shows a lot of guts,” said Joel Berg, the executive director of the [New York City Coalition Against Hunger](#). “There is no campaign money in this” for Ms. Gillibrand.