Accountability in School Meals: Streamline, Simplify, and Strengthen

In 1993, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) implemented the School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children (SMI) to improve the nutritional quality of school lunches and breakfasts and to provide school foodservice personnel with technical assistance and resources to help them meet school meal nutrition standards. As a result of this and other efforts, the nutritional quality of school meals has been improving. The majority of schools offer breakfasts and lunches that meet the standards for the recommended daily intake of key nutrients, such as vitamins A and C, calcium, protein, and iron. However, most school lunches are still too high in saturated fat and sodium and contain too few fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

Reviews of the nutritional quality of school meals occur in too few schools, do not occur frequently enough, and omit the full array of foods served in schools. All school districts participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) are required to undergo an SMI Review. However, reviews of the nutritional quality of school foods assess only the lunches served in one school per school district every five years and do not include assessments of compliance with nutrition standards for foods sold in schools outside of the school meal programs (such as through vending machines, school stores and a la carte).

**SMI Reviews are laborious for State Child Nutrition Programs and local schools**

One week’s menus for one school in each school district are reviewed. Records needed for the week being reviewed include: menus, complete production records, all standardized recipes, manufacturer’s nutrition information of commercially processed foods, food product descriptions, estimates of a la carte sales and adult meals which are part of the production record, and nutrient analysis of menus based on the method of menu planning selected by the district.
Information about school meal quality is vital to maximizing the $13 billion national investment in the school meal programs and for measuring compliance with Federal meal standards. Strengthening and simplifying the process for assessing compliance with school meal standards would enhance child health, improve the nutritional quality of school meals, strengthen oversight of the school meal programs, and inform training, technical assistance and quality improvement.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010

As a result of the HHFKA, USDA is developing a unified accountability system to address nutrition quality, program management, accuracy, and financial integrity of the meal programs. The unified system will:

- Add compliance reviews for the nutritional quality of school breakfasts (lunches will continue to be reviewed).
- Require more frequent audits (3 year intervals, up from the current 5 year review cycle).
- Establish criteria for school selection within each local education agency.
- Improve transparency by reporting results to the public and to USDA.

By requiring more frequent reviews of lunch, reviews of breakfast, and improved transparency, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act should result in increased accountability and improved compliance and meal quality. However, an emphasis on more targeted monitoring of school meal programs, continuous quality improvement, and training and technical assistance is critical to the successful implementation of the updated school meal standards.

Congress should provide $3.5 million for the USDA to conduct a study and develop new approaches to help simplify and strengthen the unified accountability system for assessing the nutritional quality of school lunches and breakfasts, compliance with school meal standards, and a means of reporting the results to parents, state agencies, and USDA.

A simplified, less burdensome and more effective approach is needed to help ensure the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs provide healthy meals to the 32 million students who eat them each day.

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