

The Dollars and Cents of the New School Meal Regulations

An Investment in Our Kids

The National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs provide balanced meals to over 31 million children each day. The U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has proposed updated school meal standards calling for meals with more fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fat-free and low-fat milk, and less sodium and unhealthy saturated and trans fats. The federal government currently invests \$13 billion a year in these programs and updated standards will help maximize that taxpayer investment by helping to ensure all children receive healthy, nutritious meals.



The Cost of Inaction

Child nutrition and obesity affect our nation's physical and fiscal health. One-third of children are overweight or obese. Obesity causes heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and other diseases. Obesity adds \$150 billion a year to national health care costs, about half of which are paid by taxpayers through Medicare and Medicaid.

Obesity also poses a threat to national security. One in four young adults are too heavy to qualify for military service and weight issues are now the leading medical reason that young adults are unable to serve in the military.

USDA Meal Patterns and Nutrition Standards

Since the Truman Administration, Congress and USDA have set nutrition standards for school lunches and breakfasts. However, current nutrition standards have not been updated in 15 years and are not consistent with current nutrition science.

In 2004, the Bush Administration and Republican-led Congress passed the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, requiring USDA to update the standards to align school meal patterns with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Over the next 7 years, USDA formed internal working groups, solicited feedback from industry and advocates, and commissioned an Institute of Medicine (IOM) study to develop recommendations to update the nutrition standards for the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs.

Schools Are Leading the Way

The proposed standards have been shown to be achievable by the more than two thousand schools that are already meeting similar standards at *current reimbursement rates* through USDA's HealthierUS Schools Challenge and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation. Schools have made changes that are consistent with the provisions in USDA's proposed rule with little or no additional funding. Unfortunately, those schools represent a small percentage of the 101,000 schools participating in the NSLP. Updated federal standards are needed to help ensure all children receive a healthy meal, regardless of where they live.

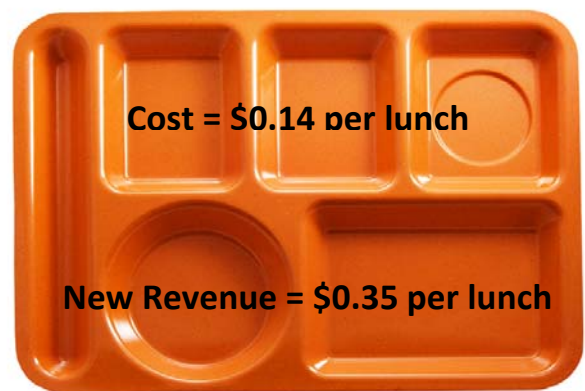
Increased Funding for Healthy School Meals

In January 2011, USDA proposed regulations to update the standards for school meals. USDA estimates that implementation of the proposed rule might increase total costs by 12% or \$6.8 billion over five years. USDA is in the process of reviewing more than 130,000 public comments received in response to this rule and identifying recommendations and considering strategies to decrease the cost of implementation.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) includes a strong package of provisions designed to increase funding for healthy school meals. Timely implementation of these provisions would help increase revenue to school food service programs to facilitate implementation of USDA's proposed school meal standards.

- Section 201 provides a 6-cent-per-lunch increase in reimbursement for school lunches that meet the new school meal standards, adding an estimated \$3.3 billion over 10 years if all schools met the standards immediately.
- Section 205 requires school districts to gradually begin closing the gap between paid meal revenues and free meal revenues to ensure that funds meant for providing healthy foods for low-income children are not diverted to other purposes. USDA estimates that closing this gap would raise \$323 million for school meals programs over the next 5 years with minimal impact on participation in the NSLP, even among low-income children.
- Section 206 is designed to ensure that the prices charged for foods sold in vending machines, a la carte lines, and school stores cover the costs to produce and sell them. A national meal-cost study conducted by USDA showed that revenues from non-program foods (such as foods sold a la carte) do not cover their costs and schools often use federal meal subsidies to offset their production. USDA estimates that implementation of the provision will bring an additional \$7.2 billion in revenue to school food service accounts over the next 5 years and will result in over 900,000 more children participating in the school meal programs.

Timely implementation of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act could fully pay for USDA's proposed school lunch regulations.



By the Numbers

Cost of Improvements to School Meals

Breakfast: \$ 4.2 billion

Lunch: \$ 2.6 billion

Total Cost: \$ 6.8 billion

Increased Revenue from the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act

Section 201: \$ 1.5 billion

Section 205: \$ 323 million

Section 206: \$ 7.2 billion

Total New Revenue: \$ 9 billion

*All figures over 5 years

Our Children Cannot Wait Any Longer

USDA's proposed updates to school meal standards are long overdue, achievable, critical to our children's health, and will maximize the taxpayer investment in the programs.

Allow USDA to proceed with the regulatory process so that our country's children will receive the healthy school meals they need and deserve.

For more information, contact Arianne Corbett with the Center for Science in the Public Interest at acorbett@cspinet.org or 202-777-8358.