

Strengthen Science-Based Nutrition Standards for School Meals & Support Healthy School Meals for all: Key Points

Background and Successes of science-based nutrition standards for school meals:

- The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) are federally funded programs that provide subsidized school meals to nearly 30 million children annually.ⁱ The majority of children (approximately 80 percent) who participate in the program are from low-income households.ⁱⁱ By law,ⁱⁱⁱ school meals must meet nutrition standards based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA). School meals provide critical nutrients and fuel kids' ability to learn. Food and nutrition insecurity disproportionately impact children of color and children from households with low incomes.
- The importance of healthy school meals has taken on new urgency during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the severe economic impacts of COVID-19, more children will likely continue to qualify for free or reduced-priced school meals than before the pandemic. For many of these children, school breakfast and lunch may be the only nutritious meals they will consume in a day.
- While overall rates of food insecurity in the US remained steady during the pandemic, the rates of food insecurity for households with children increased significantly. And, among children experiencing food insecurity, there was an increase in the severity of food insecurity where more children were reported going hungry, skipping meals, or not eating for a whole day because there was not enough money for food.^{iv}
- Thanks to the 2012 updated school nutrition standards empowered by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA), schools are providing children with healthier school meals, snacks, and beverages. These improvements are an amazing success story and one of the most important public health achievements in a generation. These science-based nutrition standards work: One study found that for children in poverty, the risk of obesity declined substantially each year after implementation of HHFKA such that obesity prevalence would have been 47 percent higher in 2018 if the nutrition standards had not been updated. Additionally, a 2021 study found that school meals are the single most healthy source of nutrition for children—more nutritious than grocery stores, restaurants, worksites, and others.^v
- Science-based nutrition standards have been shown to decrease disparities in access to healthy food, improve nutrition, and lower health costs.
- Schools are currently required to meet the nutrition standards rule from 2012 (77 FR 4088, January 26, 2012); however, the rule is now outdated by the latest nutrition science. We must protect the nutrition standards from further rollback attempts and support the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in its work to ensure children get the healthiest food possible.
- Congress must oppose efforts that weaken evidence-based school nutrition standards.
- The Build Back Better Act (BBBA) provides \$634 million towards helping schools provide healthier meals. While falling short of the White House's full \$1 billion proposal, this funding can go a long way to help schools get back on track to serving healthier meals. Schools need financial help to address certain challenges such as providing meals with more whole grains and less sodium and added sugars.
- The BBBA also helps build and rebuild our underinvested school kitchens across the country by providing \$500 million in kitchen equipment grants. What's more, the Build Back Better Act includes food assistance in the summer months to an additional 21 million children who receive free or reduced-price school meals during the school year.

Healthy School Meals for All Talking Points:

- A systematic review examining free meals for all policies found that free meals for all are positively associated with school meal participation, and in most cases, it was positively associated with diet quality, food security, and academic performance.^{vi} It is reasonable to assume that healthy school meals for all could have the same positive impact.
- Many children from struggling families do not qualify for free school meals, and school meal fees create a barrier to participation. Offering school meals to all enrolled students eliminates the cost barrier for children whose families' income is near the cutoff line, or for families whose income fluctuates throughout the year. Healthy school meals for all will prevent children who are on the edge of eligibility or experiencing homelessness from falling through the cracks.
- Healthy school meals for all will also benefit schools by cutting costs while maintaining nutritional standards by decreasing administrative burdens and increasing schools' ability to purchase at scale.^{vii}
- Enacting a healthy school meals for all law is enacting evidence-backed, cost-saving, and school-supporting policy that will keep our kids fed with nutritious meals year-round.
- The BBBA takes important steps to reduce food insecurity and improve nutrition by increasing access to free school meals for 9 million children, many of whom are children of color, by expanding the Community Eligibility Provision, the program that allows higher-poverty schools provide free meals for all. Although the bill falls short of providing free meals for all children, it does expand access for higher-poverty schools which is a step in the right direction.

Additional Talking Points on the Standards:

Added Sugars Talking Points:

- There is currently no added sugars limit for school meals and competitive foods, which is inconsistent with the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA). USDA should establish an added sugars standard for school meals and replace the total sugar standard with an added sugars standard for competitive food to be consistent with the 2020 DGA.
- Among children, intake of added sugars has been associated with increased weight gain, poor diet quality, cavities, and increased risk of cardiovascular disease.^{viii}
- Nine out of ten schools – or 92 percent – exceed the DGA limit for added sugars for breakfast and nearly seven out of ten schools – or 69 percent – for lunch.^{ix} An added sugars standard for school meals is long overdue.
- A key focus should be limiting the added sugars served at breakfast and for products including skim milk, sweetened cereals, and condiments and toppings.^x In addition to establishing a quantitative standard for added sugars in school meals, researchers suggest USDA establish limits on the added sugar content of ready-to-eat cereals and bakery products or limit the frequency of these foods in menus as well as foods that are offered with sweetened condiments and toppings.^{xi} USDA may also want to consider limiting flavored milk (e.g., offered at one meal but not both or how often in a week). Flavored milks are particularly concerning because since 2019, USDA has allowed schools to offer both skim and low-fat flavored milks, which has the potential to increase the already high levels of added sugars in school meals and, as a result, children's dietary intakes.

Sodium-reduction Talking Points:

- USDA will need to extend the compliance dates for Targets 2 and 3 with a short but realistic timeframe and provide robust technical assistance, and establish a sodium Target 4 with a more extended timeframe for compliance to align school meals with the 2020 DGA recommendations for safe sodium consumption for younger children.

- Unfortunately, nine out of ten children consume too much sodium,^{xii} increasing their risk of elevated blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke.^{xiii} The prevalence of high blood pressure is increasing in American children.^{xiv} Approximately one in six children aged 8-17 y have elevated blood pressure.^{xv} Children who eat high-sodium diets are about 40 percent more likely to have elevated blood pressure than children who eat lower-sodium diets.^{xvi}
- To align with the DGA, schools are currently required to gradually reduce the levels of sodium in meals by meeting three targets over ten years based on the following schedule: Target 1 (SY 2014-2015), Target 2 (SY 2017-2018), and Target 3 (SY 2022-2023). Schools are meeting Target 1 but they are not currently meeting Target 2 (which technically is now in effect but not enforced during COVID-19).
- USDA will also need to strengthen the sodium-reduction targets for younger children. The 2020-2025 DGA recommend that children older than 14 consume no more than 1,900 to 2,300 mg of sodium per day; no more than 1,800 mg for children aged 9-13; and no more than 1,500 mg for children aged 4-8.^{xvii} Unfortunately, children on average consume between 2,400 to 3,700 mg of sodium per day, well over the recommended levels.^{xviii}
- At the current levels (Target 1), an elementary school lunch has on average 1,230 mg, or about two-thirds a day's worth of sodium for a child in one meal. A high school lunch has on average 1,420 mg, or about half a day's worth. The Target 2 sodium levels align with the DGA by *lowering* high levels of sodium in school meals to support a healthy diet and do not constitute a *low-sodium* diet. In fact, reaching a final sodium target would put sodium levels at the ceiling of what is appropriate and recommended.
- Appealing products with safe levels of sodium are now more readily available and consumer demand for these products has grown. For example, food companies such as Revolution Foods provide school meals that already meet the Target 3 sodium levels.
- USDA should put greater effort into elevating and sharing schools' sodium reduction methods and encouraging their adoption by other schools around the country.
- While the USDA Foods (commodities) program has set a good example for schools by providing more moderate-sodium options, that work to decrease sodium in these products should continue.

100% Whole-grain-rich Talking Points:

- Schools are currently required to serve all grains as whole grain-rich, which means 51 percent of grains to be whole. Schools will need to go back to meeting the 100 percent whole grain-rich standard.
- Eating more whole grains provides critical nutrients, is a healthful source of fiber, and is associated with a lower risk of cardiovascular disease^{xix} and type 2 diabetes.^{xx}
- Children, on average, consume too few whole grains and too many refined grains.^{xxi}
- Whole grain-rich products are widely prevalent in the marketplace, and the variety of products available continues to grow.

ⁱ U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Child Nutrition Tables: National Level Annual Summary Tables: FY 1969-2020*. Washington, DC: USDA; 2021.

ⁱⁱ U.S.D.A., *Child Nutrition Tables FY 1969-2020*, 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act. Pub. L. No. 79-396, 60 Stat. 230, (codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. §§ 1751 et seq.)

^{iv} Coleman-Jensen A, et al. *Household Food Security in the United States in 2020*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, ERR-298. 2021. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/102076/err-298.pdf?v=5485>. Accessed October 19, 2021. See: Figure 5

^v Liu J, et al. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021;4(4):e215262.

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- ^x Fox MK, Gearan EC, Schwartz C, 2021.
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- ^{xvii} U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. *2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. <https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/> Accessed October 19, 2021.
- ^{xviii} U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Total Usual Nutrient Intake from Food, Beverages, and Dietary Supplements, by Gender and Age, What We Eat in America, NHANES 2015-2018*. USDA, Agricultural Research Service. 2021. https://www.ars.usda.gov/ARUserFiles/80400530/pdf/usual/Usual_Intake_Gender_WWEIA_2015_2018_Tables_TA.pdf. Accessed October 4, 2021.
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- ^{xx} Hu Y, et al. Intake of whole grain foods and risk of type 2 diabetes: results from three prospective cohort studies. *BMJ*. 2020 Jul 8;370:m2206.
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