

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.¹ The majority of children (approximately 80 percent) who participate in the program are from low-income households.² By law,³ 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.⁴
- 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.⁵
- Thanks to the 2012 updated school nutrition standards empowered by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA),⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ USDA must align school meals with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA), particularly with respect to added sugars, sodium, and whole grains in the rulemaking expected later this year.⁹
- Congress must oppose efforts that weaken evidence-based school nutrition standards.
- While stalled in Congress, the Build Back Better Act (BBBA) provides significant investments to expand access and provide greater support for schools to provide healthier meals. We are advocating that the BBBA provisions be included in any future package:
 - \$250 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 \$30 million in kitchen equipment grants.
- What's more, the Build Back Better Act includes food assistance in the summer months to an additional 29 million children who receive free or reduced-price school meals during the school year for three school years and would expand access to free meals to 9 million children for five school years.

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.¹⁰ It is reasonable to assume that healthy school meals for all could have the same positive impact.
- Offering school meals to all enrolled students would increase access to meals for children whose families' income is near the cutoff line for free or reduced priced meals and 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.¹¹
- 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).¹² The USDA should establish an added sugars standard for school meals and replace the competitive foods total sugar standard with an added sugars standard to be consistent with the 2020 DGA.
- To assist schools in meeting this standard, the department should prioritize reducing the leading sources of added sugars in school meals, particularly for breakfast, which tends to be higher in added sugars than lunch. The leading sources of added sugars at breakfast are flavored milks; sweetened cereals; condiments and toppings; and muffins and sweet/quick breads.¹³
- Among children, intake of added sugars has been associated with , poor diet quality, cavities, and increased risk of cardiovascular disease.¹⁴

- 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.¹⁵ An added sugars standard for school meals is long overdue.
- In the February 2022 rule, the USDA allowed low-fat flavored milk with the requirement that schools serve unflavored milk if serving flavored milk.¹⁶

Sodium-reduction Talking Points:

- Nine out of ten children consume too much sodium,¹⁷ increasing their risk of elevated blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke.¹⁸ The prevalence of high blood pressure is increasing in American children.¹⁹ Approximately one in six children (19.2% of boys/ 12.6% of girls) aged 8-17 y have elevated blood pressure.²⁰ Children who eat high-sodium diets are about 40 percent more likely to have elevated blood pressure than children who eat lower-sodium diets, even after controlling for age, sex, and race.²¹
- In February 2022, the USDA eliminated the original sodium Targets 2 and 3, providing interim standards for SY 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. Schools may remain at Target 1 for breakfast and must meet a modest interim Target 1A for lunch by SY 2023-2024. The USDA plans to establish a durable rule in Fall 2022 that aligns school meals with the 2020-2025 DGA.²²
- The 2020-2025 DGA recommend that children older than 14 consume no more than 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 4-8.²³ Children over age 4 on average consume between 2,400 to 3,800 mg of sodium per day, well over the recommended levels.²⁴
- At 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.²⁵
- At Target 1, a high school lunch has on average 1,420 mg, or over half a day's worth of sodium for a child in one meal.²⁶
- The 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:

- In the February 2022 rule, the USDA established a requirement that 80 percent of grains must be whole-grain-rich (or made with at least 50 percent whole grain), as they plan to establish a durable rule in Fall 2022 that aligns school meals with the 2020 DGA.²⁷ This standard is not aligned with the DGA, which states that half of grains consumed should be whole. The USDA must reinstate a DGA-aligned standard.
- Eating more whole grains provides critical nutrients, is a healthful source of fiber, and is associated with a lower risk of cardiovascular disease²⁸ and type 2 diabetes.²⁹
- Children, on average, consume too few whole grains and too many refined grains.³⁰
- Whole grain-rich products are widely prevalent in the marketplace, and the variety of products available continues to grow.

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For more information, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

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- ³ 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.)
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- ⁵ 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.
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- ¹⁶ 87 Fed Reg. 6984. Child Nutrition Programs: Transitional Standards for Milk, Whole Grains, and Sodium.
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