

Settling the Facts: Countering Myths about Nutrition Standards in School Meals

Since the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act passed in 2010, opponents of strong nutrition standards in school meals have circulated damaging myths, so much so that we hear them in public discourse. Use this document to counter common myths and settle the facts.

Myth: Healthier school foods are bad for business.

Facts:

- **School lunch participation can increase with healthier school food.** A study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that schools that implemented healthier nutrition standards for meals and snacks experienced revenue declines in the first year (from losses in competitive foods revenue), but revenues rebounded two years later.¹ During the same period, participation in the school meals program rose significantly among students from low-income families.
- **Positive messaging about better nutrition helps business.** School food service directors have indicated that marketing matters: anecdotally, we know that those who promote their programs and speak positively about better nutrition find that their positive attitude towards strong nutrition standards pays off.

Myth: Stronger nutrition standards means more food will end up in the trash.

Facts:

- **Food waste isn't a new problem, nor is it unique to schools.** According to USDA, over one-third of food (across the food system) is lost or wasted.² In school lunches, "plate waste" is highest for vegetables – on average 31 percent of which are wasted.³ While food waste in schools is a real concern, the problem is not unique nor a creation of the updated standards.
- **Food waste has either stayed the same or can decrease.** The School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study found no difference in plate waste after the updated standards as compared to findings from previous plate-waste studies.⁴ A 2015 study found that students are eating more nutritious foods and discarding less of their lunches under the healthier standards.⁵ Children ate 13 percent more of their entrees, nearly 20 percent more vegetables, and chose 12 percent more fruit

in 2014 compared to 2012, indicating that plate waste actually declined from previous estimates.

Myth: Kids don't like healthier foods.

Facts:

- According to the School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, participation was *highest* in schools serving the healthiest meals!⁶
- **Consumption of healthy school foods has increased.** Students are eating healthier foods at schools and research shows that students do not throw away their food any more than they used to before the updated nutrition standards were in place.⁷ A May 2014 Harvard School of Public Health study showed that post-implementation of nutrition standards (in fall 2012) children were 15.6 percent more of their entrees and 16.2 percent more vegetables at lunch in comparison to pre-implementation of standards (fall 2011).⁸

Myth: Reducing sodium isn't feasible for School Nutrition Programs.

Facts:

- **Food companies have been working hard to offer lower sodium products that taste great.**
 - In late 2021, CSPI released the first ever School Meals Corporate Report Card, which provides a detailed picture of the extent to which the products sold by major school food service companies for the K-12 age group would meet sodium Targets 2 and 3 across all age/grade groups. All companies in the report met or were very close to meeting Target 2 sodium (lunch).⁹
- **Schools have come up with many innovative strategies to reduce sodium.** They have employed tactics such as training staff to analyze sodium content in their menus; educating students on nutrition and menu changes; working with local and regional companies to find alternative products that met their sodium needs; and re-working their recipes to keep their foods with less sodium appealing to students.¹⁰
 - Other schools have also lowered sodium by using spice bars and salad bars that gives students more options to provide flavor with less salt.
 - Schools all around the country have successfully used these best practices to reduce sodium.

Myth: Serving 100% whole grain-rich isn't feasible. Kids don't like whole grains.

Facts:

- Before the standards were rolled back in 2018, school districts could apply for waivers if serving whole grain rich products wasn't feasible. The USDA estimates about 77-85 percent of schools were meeting the standard without any waivers in SY 2017-2018.^{11,12}
- This means that **the majority of schools were able to provide 100% whole grain-rich to students.**
- Whole grain-rich products are widely prevalent in the marketplace, and the variety of products available continues to grow. Schools, food service companies, and others in industry have provided innovated new products to meet the whole grain standards.
- There are also several tools and resources available for schools to find whole grain-rich options.^{13,14}

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

¹ Cohen JF, Gorski MT, Hoffman JA, et al. Healthier Standards for School Meals and Snacks: Impact on School Food Revenues and Lunch Participation Rates. *Am J Prev Med.* 2016;51:485-92.

² U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Food Loss and Waste*. <https://www.usda.gov/foodlossandwaste>. Accessed October 18, 2021.

³ U.S. Department of Agriculture. *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study*. Washington, DC. USDA; 2019.

⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture. *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study*. Washington, DC. USDA; 2019.

⁵ Schwartz MB, Henderson KE, Read M, Danna N, Ickovics JR. New School Meal Regulations Increase Fruit Consumption and Do Not Increase Total Plate Waste. *Child Obes.* 2015;11:242-7.

⁶ U.S. Department of Agriculture. *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study*. Washington, DC. USDA; 2019.

⁷ U.S. Department of Agriculture. *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study*. Washington, DC. USDA; 2019.

⁸ Cohen JF, Richardson S, Parker E, Catalano PJ, Rimm EB. Impact of the New U.S. Department of Agriculture School Meal Standards on Food Selection, Consumption, and Waste. *Am J Prev Med.* 2014;46:388-94.

⁹ Schwartz C, Maroney M. *2021 School Meals Corporate Report Card*.

¹⁰ U. S. Department of Agriculture. Training the Teachers in Our Biggest Classrooms. <https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2016/03/8/training-teachers-our-biggest-classrooms>. Published March 2016. Accessed March 8, 2022.

¹¹ 82 Fed. Reg. 56703. Child Nutrition Programs: Flexibilities for Milk, Whole Grains, and Sodium Requirements.

¹² 87 Fed. Reg. 6984. Child Nutrition Programs: Transitional Standards for Milk, Whole Grains, and Sodium.

¹³ U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Make Half Your Grains Whole Tip Sheet*.

<https://www.myplate.gov/eat-healthy/grains>. Accessed March 8, 2022.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture.

https://foodbuyingguide.fns.usda.gov/Content/TablesFBG/USDA_FBG_Section4_Grains.pdf. *Food Buying Guide*. Accessed March 8, 2022.