

Feeding Mind and Body

The Facts on Healthy School Meals

OUR POSITION

The U.S. is in the midst of a full-blown obesity epidemic that has disproportionately affected our children. Today, nearly one-in-three children are overweight, leading to severe health consequences, such as children developing hypertension. The American Heart Association believes that schools play a unique and critical role in reducing the toll of childhood obesity by providing nutritious foods and meals, and providing a healthy school environment.

BACKGROUND

Since the school lunch program was first created more than 70 years ago, school meal programs have always had nutrition standards. The latest update to the nutrition standards began in 2004 when the Institute of Medicine was commissioned to provide recommendations. These recommendations formed the foundation of the 2010 law and were implemented in 2012. The updated standards include more whole grains, fruits, and vegetables and offer fewer and reasonable amounts of salt, sugar, and fat.

By 2025, these healthy nutrition standards for all foods sold in schools are estimated to decrease the number of childhood obesity cases by more than two million, and lead to a cost savings of \$800 million. More important, children will be getting the heart-healthy meals they need to learn and thrive.

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Frequently asked questions about healthy school meal standards

Q: Are the new food standards too difficult and burdensome for schools to implement?

A: No. According to the USDA, more than 99% of schools are meeting the updated school lunch program nutrition standards, which qualifies them to receive an extra six cents reimbursement per meal. Various reports have also concluded that school meals are now healthier than ever and any challenges in implementing the new standards can be resolved over time with assistance from the USDA and other partners.

Q: Do healthy food options cause schools to lose money?

A: No. In fact, healthy food options can be a money maker. A growing body of research shows that schools can have strong nutrition standards while maintaining financial stability. A recent USDA analysis found that nationwide, an additional \$200 million in revenue has been gained since the updated standards went into effect. In addition, studies show that when school districts serve healthier snack foods and beverages as part of Smart Snacks, they are more likely to maintain, or even increase total revenue. That's a win-win situation.

Q: Are kids simply throwing away more of their food because of the new standards?

A: No. Kids throwing away uneaten food – known as “plate waste” – is a problem that has been around for a very long time. The updated standards did not create it, and studies have shown they have not made it any worse. Plate waste can be reduced by improving food presentation, serving locally-grown foods, lengthening the lunch period, changing the time lunch is served, or scheduling recess before lunch.

Q: Are the new school meal program standards the reason for a decline in school lunch participation?

A: No. Changes in school lunch participation are influenced by a number of factors; few are related to the new standards. For example, schools have changed the time allotted for lunch, how students pay for lunch, and other local decisions. All can directly affect participation. Studies have found that school lunch participation will likely improve over time as students grow accustomed to, and enjoy the new, healthier food options. Recent data from the USDA suggests an uptick in participation.

Q: Would students rather eat unhealthy foods than healthier options?

A: No. Several different studies have shown that students like to eat healthy foods. Kids are eating 16% more vegetables and 23% more fruit under the updated standards. In fact, a recent survey found that 70% of elementary school administrators and food service staff report positive feedback from their students. A resounding 72% of parents support the updated standards.