FACTS

Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act:

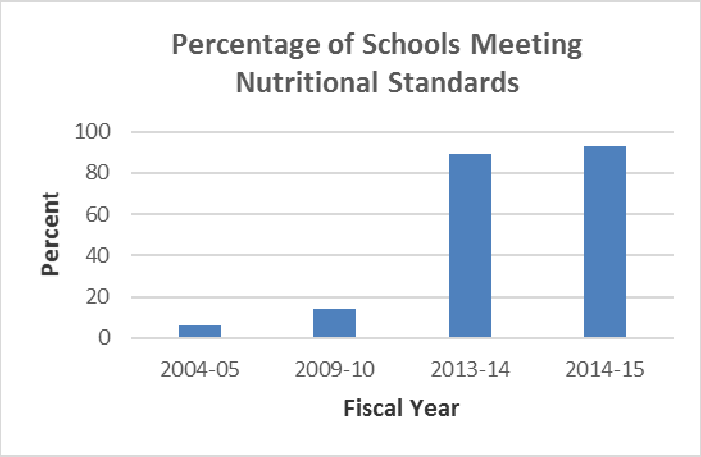
A Healthy Recipe for School Nutrition

OVERVIEW

The U.S. is in the midst of an obesity epidemic that has affected our children. Currently, one-third of children are overweight or obese, and an overwhelming majority of children meet none or only one of the five components the American Heart Association uses to define a healthy diet.[1,2,3,4,5] The health consequences of obesity in children are staggering. Recent research found that 20% of children ages 8-17 had adverse cholesterol levels.[6] Additionally, an obese child's arteries can resemble those of a middle-aged adult and obese adolescents have a greater risk of becoming obese adults.[7,8,9] To avoid condemning our children to early heart disease, obesity, and even death, schools need to be part of the solution by establishing a foundation for a lifetime of healthy behaviors. One way schools can do this is by providing healthy meals and nutrition education, and promoting a healthy food environment.

A PUBLIC HEALTH VICTORY FOR KIDS

In December 2010, President Obama signed the bipartisan Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA), which empowered the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to update the national nutrition standards for school meals and establish nutrition standards for other foods sold in schools throughout the school day.[10] As of 2014, 93% of schools in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) met these nutritional standards according to data collected by the USDA.[11] This is up from 14% in 2009-2010.[12] That means an overwhelming majority of children are receiving heart-healthy lunches while at school.[13]



USDA. School Nutrition Dietary Survey III. 2007. http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/SNDAIII-Vol1.pdf (Table VI.3, Pg. 161).
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USDA. HHFKA Section 201 Administrative Funds Spending Progress and School Meals Compliance Rates. 2014. http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/subcert.pdf
USDA Percent of School Food Authorities (SFA) certified for the performance based reimbursement as of September 2014. 2014. Unpublished raw data.

The HHFKA has several noteworthy provisions:

- Strengthened local wellness policies by creating more accountability and better implementation.
- Gave USDA the authority to establish national nutrition standards for all foods sold on the school campus throughout the school day.[10]
- Provided an extra six cents reimbursement to schools who meet the new guidelines.[10]
- Provided $5 million annually in mandatory funding for farm-to-school programs.[10]
- Created Smart Snacks standards, which stipulate that all snack foods outside the meal programs meet nutrition standards.[10] Many schools were already meeting the Smart Snacks standards when they went into effect last year.[14]

A WAY TO A HEALTHIER GENERATION

Schools have made a lot of progress. And although more work needs to be done, the HHFKA has had several other very positive effects on school nutrition and health.

- Kids are now eating 12% more fruit and are throwing away less of the entrees and vegetables.[15] School meals are also now lower in sodium and calories.[16,17,18]
- Studies have shown that incorporating technical assistance and using creative and fun games can counter plate waste and increase fruit and vegetable consumption.[19,20,21]
- 70% of elementary school administrators and food service staff report positive feedback from their students on the new lunch standards.[22]
- A Government Accounting Office (GAO) report concluded that while there have been some challenges in implementing the school lunch standards, school meals are now healthier than ever and challenges are expected to resolve over time as school food service and students adjust to the changes.[23]

While HHFKA has been the impetus for much of this progress, we still have much work to do:

- Although there has been some criticism about participation declining, this downward trend started in 2007 and lasted throughout the recession, well

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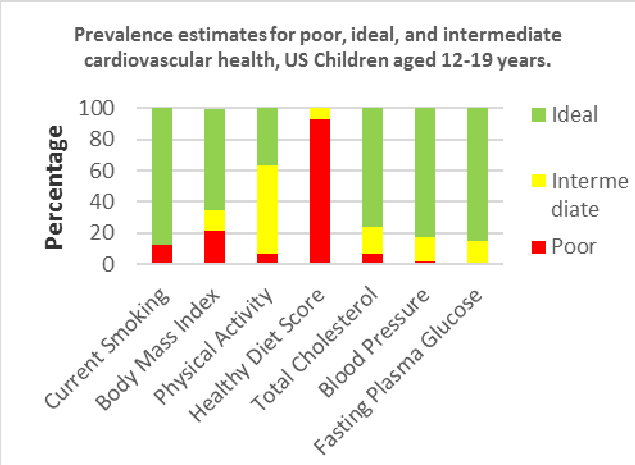
before the school meal standards went into effect in 2012.[24]

- Recent media reports have warned about the program's increasing fiscal burden on school districts.[25] However, a recent USDA analysis shows that $200 million in revenue has been gained since the implementation of the new standards.[26]



Sources: National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) 2011 to 2012; American Heart Association Statistical Update 2015.

MAKING CHILDREN HEALTHY, ACTIVE LEARNERS

A healthy school environment helps improve children's physical well-being, enhances learning, minimizes behavior problems, and increases attendance:

- Comprehensive nutrition education and promotion in schools are successful in preventing and reducing obesity, especially in low-income students who are disproportionally affected by the childhood obesity epidemic.[27]
- Children who participate in the National School Lunch Program eat greater amounts of healthy foods, get more essential vitamins and minerals, drink fewer sugar-sweetened beverages, and have an overall better quality diet.[16]

THE ASSOCIATION ADVOCATES

- Strong implementation of the nutrition standards for school meals and Smart Snacks. These standards include reducing sodium; eliminating *trans* fat; decreasing saturated fat; minimizing fried foods; offering healthy beverages; and increasing the offering of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, seafood, and low fat dairy.
- Robust technical assistance to support schools in implementing nutrition standards.
- Effective nutrition education, nutrition promotion, and model local wellness policies with effective implementation, evaluation, transparency and accountability.
- Investments in kitchen equipment and infrastructure that can help schools serve healthier meals.
- Increased reimbursement, based on the latest evidence, for school meals to help ease the burden of increased costs.
- Regional or local cooperative agreements between school districts to increase purchasing power for healthy foods.
- Cooperative agreements with local farmers and markets, as well as implementation of school gardens to increase the use of fresh fruits and vegetables in the school meal program and foster nutrition education that increases learning opportunities.

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