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USDA Announces Historic School Nutrition Improvements as Children Return to School

Schools Meet First Lady's HealthierUS School Challenge Goal with 1250 Receiving Honors for Expanding Nutrition and Physical Activity Opportunities

WASHINGTON, August 15, 2011 — Today, USDA Under Secretary Kevin Concannon hosted a conference call to highlight the historic school nutrition reforms and improvements that students and families will see in the new school year. The reforms, delivered through the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA), are improving the nutritional quality of school meals and bolstering the entire school environment. Concannon also announced that schools nationwide reached First Lady Michelle Obama's goal of 1,250 schools receiving HealthierUS School Challenge (HUSSC) honors for expanding nutrition and physical activity opportunities.

"The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act is a great win for our kids and the health of our nation," said Concannon. "I want to recognize the hundreds of schools that have already made great progress toward achieving school meals reforms – and can serve as models for others seeking to make improvements. By fueling our nation's children with the healthiest foods possible while at school, we can reinforce the healthy lifestyles that many parents are already teaching their children at home, which will put them in a position to thrive, grow and ultimately reach their full potential."

Under Secretary Concannon announced that schools had reached the goal of 1,250 schools receiving HealthierUS School Challenge honors for expanding nutrition and physical activity opportunities. HUSSC is a key component of First Lady Michelle Obama's [Let's Move!](#) initiative to end childhood obesity within a generation. Last year, the First Lady and USDA challenged the nation's communities to double the number of HUSSC schools within in a year –reaching 1,250 schools by the end of June 2011. Schools participating in the Challenge are recognized with Gold Award of Distinction, Gold, Silver, or Bronze-level certification.

Schools participating in the HUSSC voluntarily adopt USDA standards for food they serve at their schools, agree to provide nutrition education and to provide opportunities for physical activity.

USDA also took the opportunity to launch the [Healthy Access Locator](#), a web-based resource that geographically pinpoints HUSSC award-winning schools and features built-in data on diet-related diseases. The web-based map allows users to search HealthierUS School Challenge awards by geography (national, regional, local), school type (elementary, middle, high), award type (bronze, silver, gold, gold award of distinction) and date of award.

Since President Obama signed the HHSFKA into law on December 13, USDA has worked aggressively to implement the Act's historic reforms including provisions to simplify program administration and expand children's access to school meals. Key accomplishments include:

- **Nationwide Expansion of At-Risk Afterschool Meals:** USDA worked closely with states to expand the availability of afterschool meals across the nation to through the Child and Adult Care Food Program. USDA estimates this expansion could provide supper to an additional 140,000 kids in low-income areas.
- **Categorical Eligibility for Foster Children:** USDA issued guidance and provided technical assistance to states to ensure that more than 400,000 children in foster care are certified to receive free meals in all USDA child nutrition programs.
- **Strengthening Direct Certification:** USDA provided guidance, technical assistance and grant funding to states to improve their direct certification systems to help more children already receiving benefits from SNAP, TANF and FDPIR gain access to free school meals without the need for completing another eligibility form.
- **Implementing Community Eligibility:** USDA offered, Illinois, Kentucky and Tennessee, to implement the new "community eligibility" approach to reimburse schools for meals without the need for paper applications.
- **Simplified Area Eligibility for Family Day Care Homes:** USDA implemented a provision that helps more family day care home providers receive the maximum meal reimbursement based on the location of their family day care business rather than an income eligibility application.
- **Promoting School Breakfast Programs.** USDA provided guidance for schools on the HHSFKA provision requiring schools to conduct outreach on the availability of the School Breakfast Program. Research has shown that starting the day with a nutritious breakfast helps students stay alert and perform better in school.

In addition, USDA will continue to work with schools on improving the nutritional quality of food sold to children through six major components supported by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act:

- **Updated nutrition standards for school meals** based on expert recommendations from the Institute of Medicine. USDA is reviewing over 132,000 comments from schools, States, parents and others on a proposed rule in order to complete a final rule.
- **Science-based standards for all foods sold in school.** These first ever national standards will ensure that foods and beverages sold in vending machines and other venues on

school campuses contribute to a healthy diet.

- Increased funding for schools. The Act made the first real increase in school meal payments in 30 years – tied to strong performance in serving improved meals. The criteria to earn the increase will be ready when updated standards go into effect.
- Common-sense standards for revenue provided to school food authorities from non-Federal sources, to ensure that these revenues keep pace with the Federal commitment to healthy school meals and properly align with costs.
- Training and technical assistance to help schools achieve and monitor compliance. We are planning new training strategies to accompany the new nutrition standards.
- Healthy offerings through the USDA Foods program. USDA Foods are a critical part of the National School Lunch Program, constituting approximately 15-20% of the school lunch plate. Guided by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, USDA has made sweeping changes in the nutritional quality of these foods to further reduce fat, sodium, and added sugars. The Act requires the Department to purchase a wide variety of USDA Foods that support healthy meals and develop model specifications for foods purchased and served in the National School Lunch Program.

Click [here](#) for new USDA Foods being offered to schools this year.

These school food improvements will be supported by other changes in the school environment, such as physical activity and nutrition education reforms, and strengthened local school wellness policies. School meals reach nearly 32 million children each school day nationwide, and many children consume as many as half their daily calories at school.

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service oversees 15 nutrition assistance programs that touch the lives of one in four Americans over the course of a year. The programs work together to form a national safety net against hunger. The [National School Lunch](#) and [School Breakfast Programs](#) provide nutritionally balanced, free and low-cost meals to school children each school day. [SNAP](#), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program, puts healthy food in reach for more than 44 million Americans each month, half of whom are children.

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