

USDA Unveils Historic Improvements to Meals Served in America's Schools

New Standards Will Improve the Health and Wellbeing of 32 Million Kids Nationwide

FAIRFAX, Va., Jan. 25, 2012 – First Lady Michelle Obama and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today unveiled new [standards for school meals](#) that will result in healthier meals for kids across the nation. The new meal requirements will raise standards for the first time in more than fifteen years and improve the health and nutrition of nearly 32 million kids that participate in school meal programs every school day. The healthier meal requirements are a key component of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which was championed by the First Lady as part of her Let's Move! campaign and signed into law by President Obama.

“As parents, we try to prepare decent meals, limit how much junk food our kids eat, and ensure they have a reasonably balanced diet,” said First Lady Michelle Obama. “And when we're putting in all that effort the last thing we want is for our hard work to be undone each day in the school cafeteria. When we send our kids to school, we expect that they won't be eating the kind of fatty, salty, sugary foods that we try to keep them from eating at home. We want the food they get at school to be the same kind of food we would serve at our own kitchen tables.”

“Improving the quality of the school meals is a critical step in building a healthy future for our kids,” said Vilsack. “When it comes to our children, we must do everything possible to provide them the nutrition they need to be healthy, active and ready to face the future – today we take an important step towards that goal.”

The final standards make the same kinds of practical changes that many parents are already encouraging at home, including:

- Ensuring students are offered both fruits and vegetables every day of the week;
- Substantially increasing offerings of whole grain-rich foods;
- Offering only fat-free or low-fat milk varieties;
- Limiting calories based on the age of children being served to ensure proper portion size; and
- Increasing the focus on reducing the amounts of saturated fat, trans fats and sodium.

A sample lunch menu with a before and after comparison is available to view and download in [PDF](#) and [JPG](#) formats.

USDA built the new rule around recommendations from a panel of experts convened by the Institute of Medicine — a gold standard for evidence-based health analysis. The

standards were also updated with key changes from the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans – the Federal government’s benchmark for nutrition – and aimed to foster the kind of healthy changes at school that many parents are already trying to encourage at home, such as making sure that kids are offered both fruits and vegetables each day, more whole grains, and portion sizes and calorie counts designed to maintain a healthy weight.

USDA received an unprecedented 132,000 public comments on its proposed standards (available on the web at www.regulations.gov) – and made modifications to the proposed rule where appropriate. USDA Under Secretary Kevin Concannon said: “We know that robust public input is essential to developing successful standards and the final standards took a number of suggestions from stakeholders, school food service professions and parents to make important operational changes while maintaining nutritional integrity.”

The new standards are expected to cost \$3.2 billion over the next five years -- less than half of the estimated cost of the proposed rule and are just one of five major components of the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act, now implemented or under development, that will work together to reform school nutrition. In addition to the updated meal standards, unprecedented improvements to come include:

- The ability to take nutrition standards beyond the lunchline for the first time ever, foods and beverages sold in vending machines and other venues on school campuses will also contribute to a healthy diet;
- Increased funding for schools – an additional 6 cents a meal is the first real increase in 30 years – tied to strong performance in serving improved meals;
- Common-sense pricing standards for schools to ensure that revenues from non-Federal sources keep pace with the Federal commitment to healthy school meals and properly align with costs; and
- Training and technical assistance to help schools achieve and monitor compliance.

The final nutrition standards released today also provide more time for schools to implement key changes, which will be largely phased in over a three-year period, starting in School Year 2012-2013. For example, schools will be permitted to focus on changes in the lunches in the first year, with most changes in breakfast phased in during future years.

USDA's [Food and Nutrition Service](#) administers 15 nutrition assistance programs including the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs, the Summer Food Service Program, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Together these programs make up the federal nutrition safety net.

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