

Testimony  
*School Meal Regulations:*  
*Discussing the Costs and Consequences for Schools and Students*  
House Committee on Education and the Workforce

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Good morning. I'm Margo Wootan, the director of Nutrition Policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a nonprofit organization, where I've worked on school foods and other nutrition issues for over 20 years.

We probably all agree on the importance of our children's health. Unfortunately, a third of children are overweight or obese, and unhealthy eating habits and obesity are major contributors to heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and other diseases. Obesity adds \$190 billion a year to national health care costs, about half of which are paid by taxpayers through Medicare and Medicaid.

Where there may be some disagreement is on what the federal government's role is in protecting children's health, and specifically for this hearing, the federal role in determining school meal standards.

That question was answered before I was born. Unlike other aspects of education, school foods have long been predominantly a federal program. Since the 1940s, dating back to the Truman Administration, Congress and USDA have set the nutrition standards for school meals.

While most education funding comes from states and localities, they contribute less than 10% of the funds for school meals. Congress invests more than \$13 billion a year in the school lunch and breakfast programs. It is a matter of good government and fiscal responsibility to ensure that those funds are well spent—that these nutrition programs provide good nutrition to children.

In 2004, the Bush Administration and the Republican-led Congress passed the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, requiring USDA to update the school meal standards to align them with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Over the next seven years, USDA formed internal working groups, solicited feedback from industry, food service, and nutrition experts, and commissioned an Institute of Medicine study to develop recommendations to update the meal standards.

USDA proposed standards based on all that input, and then gave ample opportunity for parents, schools, food companies, Congress, and others to comment on them. Over 130,000 people commented—the overwhelming majority in favor of the proposed standards. Parents were particularly loud and clear—over 80% support the new school meal standards.

As you contemplate whether the new school meal standards are achievable, I urge you to consider the tens of thousands of schools that have already made great progress, including schools I'd be happy to put you in touch with in Indiana, Tennessee, Minnesota, California, and other states. The Alliance for a Healthier Generation has recruited over 14,000 schools; USDA's HealthierUS School Challenge has certified over 6,500 schools (see <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/healthierus/awardwinners.html> for a list), and there are a growing number of schools qualifying for the six cents in additional school lunch reimbursement, which is available to schools meeting the new standards.

Change takes time, and not surprisingly, some schools are experiencing challenges. USDA, the Alliance, and others are providing technical assistance, trainings, model menus and product specifications, and other resources to help schools work through challenges.

USDA has shown that it is listening to schools' concerns. When schools faced challenges with the grain and protein limits, USDA responded and gave them additional flexibility, which the agency has said it plans to make permanent. In April, USDA also provided additional flexibility on paid-meal pricing.

The answer to the challenges faced by some schools is not to revert back to serving unhealthy food in schools. Our kids need us to persevere and ensure that schools get the help and support they need. I hope that one outcome from this hearing will be enhanced efforts to help struggling schools with additional technical assistance, including the opportunity to learn from the many schools that are successfully implementing the new school meal standards.

And there's a lot to learn from successful schools around the country. For example, simple things like taste tests, having students vote for favorite menu items, giving menu items catchy names, and sprucing up cafeterias are some of the ways schools have been increasing student acceptance of healthy school meals. The photos in my written testimony depict a few of the appealing and healthful meals that many schools are serving.



Provo School District (UT)



Saint Paul Public Schools (MN)



DC Public Schools



Burlington School District (VT)

As you can see, these meals provide plenty of food and should meet the needs of the vast majority of young people in schools. For those students who want more, many schools offer additional servings of fruits and vegetables at no additional charge. And for those students with exceptional calorie needs, such as competitive athletes, they can purchase a second lunch or healthy a la carte options to supplement their meal or take advantage of afterschool snack or afterschool supper programs.

Importantly, the school meal standards are being achieved at current reimbursement rates by thousands of schools, and USDA is providing an additional six cents per lunch to schools that meet the new school meal standards.

USDA's updates to the school meal standards are long overdue, are achievable, are critical to our children's health, and will maximize the taxpayer investment in these important child nutrition programs. We need to give some schools and students a little more time to adjust, and ensure that struggling schools get the technical assistance they need to join the thousands of schools that are successfully serving healthy school meals to students.

Thank you.

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