FACT SHEET: POLICY ISSUE

School Food Access and Quality

Overview

Each day in the United States, more than 45 million students receive breakfast and/or lunch through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) (30M),[1] and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) (14M).[2] These numbers include all participating children, whether they receive free, reduced-price or full-price meals. The majority of student participants are from under-resourced families.[3]

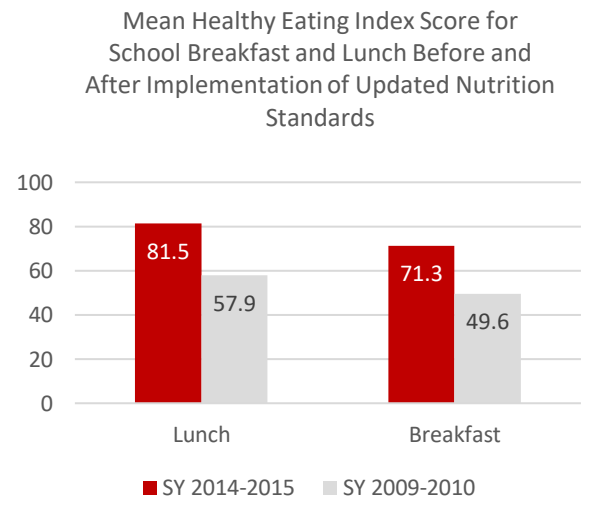
Since its inception in the 1940s, school lunches have always had nutrition standards. Today, health concerns have shifted from children being malnourished to children consuming too many calories from foods that have minimal nutritional value. Currently, approximately 1 in 5 children and adolescents in the U.S. have obesity and are also at increased risk of developing heart disease and diabetes.[4] Youth now have health conditions previously only associated with adults, like high blood pressure[5] and high cholesterol levels.[6] Most school-aged children do not consume a diet aligned with American Heart Association recommendations. Children consume far too much sodium [7] and added sugars,[8] and too few fruits and vegetables and whole grains.[9]

The most recent updates to the national nutrition standards began in 2004, when the National Academy of Medicine was commissioned to provide recommendations on what constitutes a healthy school meal.[10,11] In December 2010, the bipartisan Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) was signed into law, further empowering the USDA to update the national nutrition standards for school meals. In 2012, school meals nutrition standards were updated for the first time in decades, and in 2014, nutrition standards for other foods sold in schools throughout the school day were established. HHFKA also provided an extra per meal reimbursement incentive to encourage programs to adopt the updated standards.[12] As of 2016, more than 99 percent of schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) were meeting these nutrition standards.[13] This means that an overwhelming majority of children are now receiving healthier lunches at school. While there have been attempts to rollback or weaken the nutrition standards in the ensuing decade, and while there were waivers in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2024, the USDA published a final rule to level set and further strengthen school nutrition standards to more closely align with the current *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, including establishing an added sugars limit.[14]

A Victory for Kids, Schools and the Economy

School meal standards help schools promote a positive food environment and establish a foundation for a lifetime of healthy behaviors. Studies have suggested that a healthy diet is associated with improved academic achievement[15] and that certain breakfast programs are associated with increased attendance.[16] Additionally, the updated nutrition standards have had several beneficial effects on the health of students and participation in programs, and have not caused increased food waste.

- School meals have gotten healthier with the implementation of the 2012 standards,[3,17] students are eating better,[18] and school lunch participants have healthier lunches than non-participants.[3]



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- The nutrition standards have not had a negative effect on participation over time; participation has even increased for children who receive free meals.[19]
- A national study found that improved school nutrition standards are associated with a decrease in obesity among students from under-resourced families.[20]
- According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study*, food waste has not increased since the implementation of the HHFKA and it was a problem before the meal pattern updates.[3]

Recent studies have concluded that school meals are getting healthier and any challenges are resolving with time, industry innovations and increased technical assistance to programs.[21] In fact, targeted support and technical assistance appear to help mitigate any issues in meeting the standards.

- In a 2016 national survey of 489 school nutrition directors, 84 percent of program directors reported rising or stable combined revenue (meal reimbursements plus snack and beverage sales) after implementing the updated nutrition standards.[22]
- A study found that schools were able to follow the 2012 nutrition standards regardless of whether they were located in high-income or low-income ZIP codes.[23]
- Simple changes in how the lunch day is structured, such as time of day lunch is served, length of lunch, having lunch after recess and an inviting atmosphere can also reduce plate waste.[24]
- Data suggests that flavored milk can be removed from schools and consumption of plain milk can increase over time.[25]
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools faced major challenges in providing healthy meals to students, including navigating ways to meet the needs of students and vendors, as well as adapting to new policy changes and fluctuating participation rates. However, implementing federal waiver flexibilities and collaborating with nonprofits, businesses and government agencies helped improve access to meals.[26]
- As food prices rise, school meals may be a more cost-effective option for parents. For example, a comprehensive study by the USDA found that the average cost of producing a school lunch pre-pandemic was about $3.81.[3]

Evidence also suggests that healthy school foods can benefit the economy:

- Better nutrition standards lead to healthier students, which can potentially reduce health care costs associated with diet-related diseases such as cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes.[27]
- A recent report found that school meal programs in the U.S. provide $40 billion in health and economic benefits to over 30 million students daily, mainly through improvements in health outcomes and poverty reduction.[28]
- Every $1 invested in U.S. school meal programs provides $2 in health and economic benefits.[28]

Nutrition Security

In 2023, 13.8 million children living in the U.S. were food insecure.[29] The NSLP and SBP are essential nutrition assistance programs and important community safety nets to ensure children have access to healthy foods throughout the school year and during emergency situations, like COVID-19 and natural disasters. Research from the USDA has found that children from food-insecure and marginally secure households were more likely to eat school meals and receive more of their food and nutrient intake from school meals than did other children.[30] A longitudinal study found that NSLP participation was associated with a 14 percent reduction in the risk of food insufficiency among households with at least one child receiving a free or reduced-price school lunch.[31]

In a bipartisan effort to close the summer hunger gap and improve children's health, Congress passed legislation in late 2022 to make the Summer EBT program, now known as SUN Bucks, permanent. The SUN Bucks program offers eligible families with school-aged children a benefit to purchase healthy food at grocery stores, farmers' markets and other retailers.[32] SUN Bucks is an important community economic driver that supports food retailers, producers, suppliers and transporters.[33] The program is also especially important for families living in rural areas, where transportation issues can make it difficult to reach summer meal program sites.[33]

Community Eligibility Provision and Universal Meals

During the pandemic, Congress provided waivers to programs to implement Healthy School Meals for All (HSMFA) regardless of its Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) status. HSMFA is a popular and easy way to ensure all kids get a healthy meal and with the federal government allowing the waivers to expire, more and more states are adopting HSMFA.

As part of the HHFKA, Congress created CEP to allow schools in under-resourced communities to provide free meals to all students and do not need eligible students to individually apply.[34] Reimbursement to programs is provided on the percentage of students who are eligible for free meals.

- Schools that participate in CEP often see increased participation and a reduction in paperwork, allowing school nutrition professionals to focus less on program administration and more on offering and preparing healthy, appealing meals.[35,36]
- CEP reduces stigma that school meals are only for children from under-resourced families.[37]
- When schools do not need to collect fees for paid and reduced-price meals, students can move more quickly through the cafeteria line, potentially giving children, especially the youngest and most vulnerable children, more time to eat.[37]

The Association Advocates

To keep the school meals program strong and help ensure children living in the U.S. have access to nutritious food throughout the year, the American Heart Association will continue to advocate for:

- robust school nutrition standards that align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans,
- a national HSMFA program,
- improving the nutrition standards for summer programs,
- expanding access to the school meals program—including programs over the summer and during school closures, and
- supporting school nutrition staff to ensure staff are able to serve nutritious foods.

These critical programs support the health and well-being of children living in the U.S.

For more information and resources from the American Heart Association's policy research department, please visit **www.heart.org/policyresearch**

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