



# Health Policy Snapshot

Childhood Obesity

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ISSUE BRIEF

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## How can the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act make school foods healthier?

### Takeaways:

- The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act requires that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issue new national nutrition standards for school meals and for competitive foods and beverages sold through vending machines and elsewhere.
- The new law authorizes an increase in federal funding by 6 cents per lunch for schools that meet USDA's updated nutrition standards, the largest reimbursement increase above inflation in more than 30 years.
- The new law authorizes some \$50 million for training and technical assistance to help school food service workers prepare nutritious meals.

### Overview

Schools feed tens of millions of children every day, and many of those students consume more than half of their daily calories while at school.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the foods and beverages sold in school are generally of poor nutritional quality. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, signed into law in December 2010, will help schools offer healthier meals, snacks and drinks. Nutrition advocates believe that the law must be rigorously enforced to

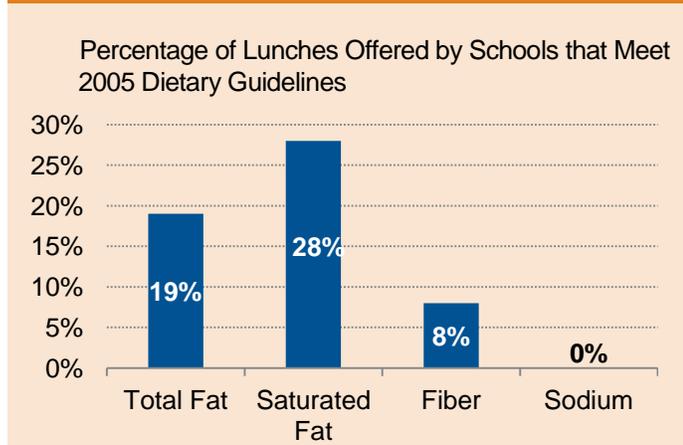
help children get the nutrients they need to grow, learn and succeed.

### NUTRITIONAL GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOLS

School meals are the primary source of food for many children—especially those from lower-income families, many of whom are at high risk for obesity and serious health consequences like type 2 diabetes and heart disease.<sup>2</sup> Yet the majority of school meals fail to meet the 2005 dietary guidelines issued by USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services.<sup>1</sup>

- **The state of school meals.** National data show a significant need to improve the quality of meals. In the 2004–05 school year, for example, 43 percent of lunch entrees included pre-packaged high-calorie, high-fat foods, such as pizza, chicken nuggets and burritos. Nearly a third of schools served whole milk, a major contributor of saturated fat in children's diets. French fries were one of the most frequently offered vegetables. Only 5 percent of schools offered whole-grain breads and rolls.<sup>3</sup>
- **Improving school meals.** In 2011, USDA proposed updates to standards for the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs, the first such update in 15 years. The proposed standards reflect recommendations from the Institute of Medicine (IOM), which call for adding more fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat and nonfat milk to school meals while limiting

### Dietary Components of Most Concern Among Schools in the National School Lunch Program: 2004–2005



Source: [www.rwjf.org/files/research/20090102sndapolicybrief.pdf](http://www.rwjf.org/files/research/20090102sndapolicybrief.pdf)

calories and unhealthy fats and sodium. USDA wants the new standards in place for fall 2012.

- Eliminating junk foods and sugary drinks.** The new law also requires that USDA strengthen nutritional standards for competitive foods—those sold in vending machines, school stores and à la carte lunch lines. When competitive foods and beverages are available, students tend to consume more unhealthy items and more calories. National data show that 68 percent of students drank sugar-sweetened beverages like soda during the school day in 2004–05.<sup>3</sup> Many students who buy lunch also buy competitive foods from the cafeteria, and they tend to eat less of their lunch, take in fewer nutrients and consume more fat.<sup>4</sup>

### INCREASED REIMBURSEMENT

To compensate for increasing revenue shortfalls in school meal programs, many schools serve fewer fresh and nutritious foods. Continuing budget constraints will make it tough for many schools to meet the new meal standards.

The IOM estimates that adding fruits, vegetables and whole grains to meals may increase schools' costs by up to 25 percent per breakfast and 9 percent per lunch. The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act authorizes

the 6-cent increase in federal funding per lunch. These funds need to be appropriated by Congress.<sup>4</sup>

### TRAINING AND EQUIPMENT NEEDS

Without properly trained food service staff and adequate kitchens, schools will not be able to prepare meals that meet the new nutritional standards.

- Training food service staff.** The new law authorizes \$50 million to help train school food service workers in healthier cooking methods, such as steaming and roasting to prepare more nutritious and appealing meals. These funds still need to be appropriated by Congress.
- Upgrading kitchens.** While the law does not authorize funds for purchasing kitchen equipment, it does allow schools to receive grants to buy equipment. Schools nationwide need to replace broken and outdated equipment. Cafeterias lack equipment for baking, grilling and roasting; many have the capacity only to reheat pre-packaged foods. In a national survey, nearly half of school food service providers still rely on deep-fat fryers. Schools will need steamers, ovens and salad bars to meet the strengthened standards.

### WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- [The Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods Project \(RWJF/Pew Charitable Trusts\)](#)
- [School Policies and Practices to Improve Health and Prevent Obesity \(Bridging the Gap\)](#)
- [Improving Child Nutrition Policy: Insights from National USDA Study of School Food Environments \(RWJF\)](#)

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.healthyschoolfoodsnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/IOMFactSheet\\_11-02-17\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.healthyschoolfoodsnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/IOMFactSheet_11-02-17_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/\\_asset/rfl6dk/SS\\_2011\\_execsum.pdf](http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/_asset/rfl6dk/SS_2011_execsum.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/\\_asset/6q2pg2/ES\\_2010\\_monograph.pdf](http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/_asset/6q2pg2/ES_2010_monograph.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>[http://www.healthyschoolfoodsnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/FINAL%20Fact%20Sheet\\_Equipment%20and%20Training%20March%202011.pdf](http://www.healthyschoolfoodsnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/FINAL%20Fact%20Sheet_Equipment%20and%20Training%20March%202011.pdf)