

Meals that kids receive in school are an important part of a child's education. Over 31 million children receive a lunch and over 13 million children receive a school breakfast at school every day.<sup>1 2</sup> These meals help children get the fuel and nutrients that they need to help kids learn and grow into healthy, productive adults. For many years federal and local officials have recognized the importance of the school meals programs so that our country's future workforce and military can be well prepared.

When schools participate in the federal school meals program the school is reimbursed by the federal government for every meal that is served and has met standards. A reimbursement takes place whether the family has paid full price or a low-income child has received a free meal.<sup>3</sup> This is an important investment that the federal government makes in local schools so that all children, no matter where they live, get access to school meals.

Over the last decade many local and federal officials have worked to make the food served to our children in school healthier so that all children not only have access to food, but healthy food as well. This has been crucial given our country's ongoing mission to curb rising childhood obesity rates, as well as end childhood hunger, especially during economic downturns. In addition around \$16 billion dollars are spent on schools meals so it is good fiscal policy to spend these tax dollars wisely in order to make our children healthy.<sup>4 5</sup>

In 2010, during the last child nutrition reauthorization, Congress recognized the challenges of child hunger and obesity and the importance of spending federal dollars wisely. A bipartisan group of Members of Congress came together and passed much needed updates to the school meals programs through the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA). School meals had previously had standards, but this law directed the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to use the most up to date science and research to make these standards more current with what is needed for a child's daily nutrition today.<sup>6</sup>

Children spend a significant amount of time in school and anywhere from a third to half of their daily calories are consumed while in school. It is important that when families send their children to school, kids don't receive mixed messages about what is healthy and what they should be eating each day. As kids learn reading and math skills that lay the foundation for later learning and success, it is important that healthy eating is taught, as well modeled, throughout the school day.

Some of the important provisions that USDA has been implementing since the passages of HHFKA are below:

## **Improvements to the Nutritional Quality of School Meals**

Over the last 20 years, the nutritional quality of school meals has been improving. The majority of schools were offering breakfasts and lunches that meet the standards for key nutrients, such as vitamins A and C, calcium, protein, and iron. However, many school meals were too high in saturated fat and sodium and too few children were choosing meals with enough fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. The HHFKA provides significant resources and opportunities for schools to continue to improve the nutritional quality of the meals that they serve. HHFKA required USDA to update the school meal program standards to be consistent with current nutritional science and provided an additional 6 cents per lunch to schools that meet these updated nutritional standards. This historic investment is the first reimbursement rate increase, over inflation, in more than 30 years and helps schools serve meals that meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Over 90% of schools are currently meeting the new standards and are receiving the additional reimbursement for doing so.<sup>7</sup>

### **Creates Community Eligibility for Schools Nationwide**

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 created a new option for schools, known as the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which is offered through the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs.<sup>8</sup> CEP is a voluntary program at the district level that allows schools in high poverty areas to forgo the administrative hassles of collecting meal program applications and instead can focus on the nutrition needs of students by providing breakfast and lunches at no charge to all students. CEP helps ensure that low-income children have access to healthy meals and cuts down on administrative costs for schools districts. Many studies have shown that when children eat meals at schools they have less absenteeism and better test scores.<sup>9</sup>

### **Establishes National Nutrition Standards for All Food Sold in Schools**

Prior to the recent updates, standards for vending, a la carte and other foods sold outside the meal programs, but at school were 30 years out of date and did not reflect current nutrition science or address concerns about children's diets. HHSFKA allowed the USDA to update the nutrition standards for everything sold in schools. Strong nutrition standards in schools will support nutrition and health education for children, and parents' ability to help their children eat healthfully, when they aren't present. The updates, known as Smart Snacks in Schools will be implemented this upcoming school year (2014-2015).<sup>10</sup>

### **Strengthens Local School Wellness Policies**

In the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, Congress established the local school wellness policies, which help school districts foster an environment that supports children eating well and being physically active. As a result, many schools have adopted policies for foods sold on campus, strengthened physical education, and expanded nutrition education. However, implementation across the country has not been uniformly strong. The HHSFKA strengthened standards for school wellness policies while still permitting flexibility to tailor policies to local needs. New school wellness standards will likely curb food marketing to children, allowing only food items sold during the school day to be advertised.<sup>11</sup>

These items are just some of the major updates and improvements to the school food environment. What is great about these updates is that it will help all kids no matter what socioeconomic background they come from. Whether a child is plagued with obesity, hunger, or poor nutrition the school food and wellness programs give all children equal access to a healthy environment. This is important for all kids, but especially for low-income children. Low-income children often times don't have a choice as to whether they eat a school meal or not, as their family may not be able to afford to send them to school with a lunch. Our country should make sure that these children are gaining access to healthy meals when they receive a meal at school. Unfortunately, with one in five children coming from a family that is food insecure, the school meal may be the only meal, or for many kids the only healthy meal, that they eat each day.<sup>12</sup> We owe it to all of our children to make sure that they are provided with healthy options at school.

With all of these positive changes and new standards in schools taking place, USDA has devoted significant time and resources to technical assistance for schools so that they can successfully meet the new standards. While there have been challenges for some schools, an overwhelmingly majority of schools have been successful and USDA has revised provisions when necessary for schools that face continued challenges.

USDA has periodically made changes to the new standards when it made sense to allow schools to have flexibility in order for the standards to be successfully implemented by school food service directors and the staff that administer the programs, all while still working towards the goal of serving healthy food to all kids. Some changes that have been made were the relaxing of grain and protein requirements, as well delaying the 100% whole grain rich requirement (which means that the grain product is

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made up of at least 50% whole grains) for some products such as whole-wheat pasta do to schools facing challenges of acquiring the right products on the marketplace.<sup>13</sup>

There is no doubt that after many years of some schools serving foods that were less healthy and with not enough whole grains, fruits, and vegetables that there will continue to be challenges in making sure that all schools meet new standards. But we did not start feeding our children unhealthy food overnight and all stakeholders should stay committed to serving healthy food to our nation's children.

Over time it is vital for people who care about our nation's kids to continue to work together with USDA in order to serve healthy food to all kids. It is imperative that we continue to work towards this goal and not delay important standards from moving forward. A healthy childhood with access to nutritious food is as important for children as it is for kids to learn to read and write. When children face challenges in reading or math, teachers and parents don't give up, they find new and creative ways for kids to learn and further their education. Kids learning healthy eating habits in school should be no different.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> United States. Department of Agriculture. Food and Nutrition Service. *National School Lunch Program*. What Is The National School Lunch Program? USDA, Sept. 2013. Web. 3 June 2014.

<sup>2</sup> United States. Department of Agriculture. Food and Nutrition Service. *National School Breakfast Program*. What Is The School Breakfast Program? USDA, Sept. 2013. Web. 3 June 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Federal Register, Vol. 78, No. 144 United States Department of Agriculture National School Lunch, Special Milk, and School Breakfast Programs, National Average Payments/Maximum Reimbursement Rates (2013).

<sup>4</sup> United States. Department of Agriculture. Food and Nutrition Service. *National School Lunch Program*. What Is The National School Lunch Program? USDA, Sept. 2013. Web. 3 June 2014

<sup>5</sup> United States. Department of Agriculture. Food and Nutrition Service. *National School Breakfast Program*. What Is The School Breakfast Program? USDA, Sept. 2013. Web. 3 June 2014.

<sup>6</sup> More information on the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 is available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/healthy-hunger-free-kids-act>

<sup>7</sup> FACT SHEET: Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act School Meals Implementation." *Food and Nutrition Service*. The United States Department of Agriculture, 20 May 2014. Web. 28 May 2014.

<sup>8</sup> United States. Department of Agriculture. Food and Nutrition Service. *Community Eligibility Provision: Guidance and Q&As*. By Cynthia Long. Alexandria, VA: USDA, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine-Thottungal, Robin, John Kern,, Jackie Key, and Becca Sherman. *Ending Childhood Hunger: A Social Impact Analysis*. Rep. Washington, DC: Share Our Strength, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> More information on Smart Snack in Schools can be found at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/smart-snacks-school>

<sup>11</sup> More information on School Wellness Policies can be found at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/local-school-wellness-policy>

<sup>12</sup> Coleman-Jensen, Alisha, Mark Nord, and Anita Singh. Household Food Security in the United States in 2012, ERR-155, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, September 2013.

<sup>13</sup> More information regarding flexibilities for new food standards can be found here: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/nutrition-standards-school-meals>