USDA PROPOSAL TO MODERNIZE SCHOOL NUTRITION STANDARDS

FIRST FOCUS ON CHILDREN

The U.S. Department of Agriculture just released an update to the nutrition standards schools must meet in the breakfasts and lunches served to more than 30 million children.

The last time USDA fully updated school meal standards was in 2012, and the new standards proved successful. Research on the impact of those changes found that the nutritional quality of school meals increased by 41%, fruit, vegetable, and whole grain consumption increased, and obesity prevalence for children in poverty came in 47% lower than expected in 2018. However, obesity rates among children continue to rise with devastating consequences, including early onset cardiovascular risks. It is more imperative than ever that USDA continue to prioritize the nutritious quality of the food students consume at school.

USDA is heeding these warnings and updating its dietary guidelines to reflect the most updated science. Every five years, USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) update the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs)*, which recommend what Americans should eat to meet nutrient needs, promote health, and prevent disease based on the most recent nutrition science. In an effort to align the standards for school meals with the DGAs, the proposed rule is suggesting changes to four main components of school meals: **Added sugars, milk, sodium, and whole grains**.

Added Sugars

For the first time, USDA is proposing a limit on added sugars in school meals. The DGAs recommend limiting intake of added sugars to less than 10% of daily caloric intake. However, between 70% and 80% of school-aged children exceed this recommended limit.

Research has found that high amounts of added sugars in a child's diet are associated with a higher risk of tooth decay, obesity, Type 2 diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular disease and cardiometabolic and kidney diseases.

Currently, schools are able to serve menu items that are high in added sugars as long as they stay within weekly calorie limits. However, research shows that this strategy does not adequately reduce the intake of added sugars, and that a direct limit is more effective.

Milk

Currently, USDA allows schools to offer fat-free and low-fat (1% fat) milk, flavored and unflavored, for school breakfast and lunch.

Fat-free and low-fat milk is high in nutrients needed for healthy development and stays within the caloric guidelines from the DGAs. However, flavored milk is typically high in added sugars and sodium. Research has found that flavored skim milk was the leading source of added sugar in school meals.

In the proposed rule, USDA offers two alternatives for the milk standards that they will choose between depending on stakeholder feedback. Alternative A proposes to allow fat-free and low-

fat flavored milk for high school students while kindergarten through Grade 8 would be allowed a variety of unflavored milks. The goal of this alternative, according to USDA, is to reduce young school children's exposure to added sugars at a time when children's taste preferences are developing and due to the long term negative implications of early and regular consumption of sugar.

Alternative B would keep the current standard, but all flavored milks would have to meet the new proposed added sugars limit.

Sodium

The proposed rule suggests a gradual sodium reduction in school meals over several school years, beginning in 2025.

Currently, school meals must not exceed certain thresholds for sodium per week, which varies by age and grade groups. In the new guidance, USDA is proposing a 30% reduction of sodium over three school years starting in 2025, which the department says is a gradual change informed by the Food and Drug Administration's voluntary sodium reduction goals for industry.

Reducing sodium intake for children is extremely important for life-long health. Research indicates that children aged 2-to-19 consume **double the amount of sodium** recommended by the American Heart Association. High sodium intake contributes to high blood pressure in children, which can result in the early development of heart disease. Given children's taste preferences develop at a young age, it is important to reduce sodium in the lower grades.

Whole Grains

Before the pandemic, regulations required only 50% of the weekly grains offered in school meals be whole grain-rich, meaning that a product must contain at least 50% whole grains. Last year in a transitional guidance, USDA required that the weekly grains offered in school meals be 80% whole grain-rich.

USDA is now proposing two alternative options on the whole grain requirement. The first alternative proposes maintaining the current 80% whole grain-rich requirement. The second alternative would require that 100% of grains offered be whole grain-rich, but schools would be allowed to offer enriched grains just one day of each school week.

Whole grains offer widely recognized health benefits, but consumption levels are **well below recommended**, especially among children. Whole grains are nutrient dense and have been shown to **reduce the risk of heart disease**. The high amount of fiber in whole grains makes a person feel fuller for longer, which in turn can prevent overeating and ultimately help with weight management.

Comments on the proposed rule are due by April 10, 2023 and can be submitted **via this portal**. First Focus on Children will be working on its comments in the coming weeks and will make them public when they are final.