USDA

United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
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TO: Regional Directors
Special Nutrition Programs
All Regions

State Directors
Child Nutrition Programs
All States

As you know, the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids (HHFK) Act of 2010 directed the Department of Agriculture to update nutrition standards for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) for the first time in over 15 years. The Department developed these updated standards based on the most up-to-date science and expert recommendations from sources such as the Institute of Medicine (IOM) Report and the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The new meal patterns are based on age-appropriate nutrition and physical activity habits of the average student.

Recently, some questions have been raised as to how the new standards affect highly active students who may need more calories or protein. Previously the meal patterns had required a minimum number of calories to be served. However, scientific experts at the IOM identified this as a critical area of concern since, with no limit to the number of calories being served, some students were receiving nearly double the recommended amount of calories at lunch.

The updated requirements are not designed to mandate a one-size-fits-all approach to school lunch and, in fact, they now allow for a range of calories with both a minimum and maximum level, adjusted to the age of the student. FNS would like to take this opportunity to put forward four additional clarifying facts that should address concerns raised.

First, it is important to understand that the NSLP is subsided by taxpayer dollars, providing millions of free and reduced price lunches each and every day. For the first time in history, through the HHFK Act, Congress directly linked additional Federal resources for schools to adherence to the new, updated nutrition guidelines. It is appropriate that Federal taxpayer dollars be spent on providing kids with a balanced, healthy meal and it is also mandated by law.

Second, the ability for students to purchase as much additional food as they need is unchanged under the new requirements. Currently, over 90 percent of schools offer a la carte sales during school lunch periods and students are allowed to purchase as much of these individual servings as they like either instead of or in addition to the meal offered as part of the NSLP. Further, parents always have the option of having their children bring additional foods from home to supplement meals received at school.

Third, schools are also encouraged to provide additional nutrition to students after school before they participate in school sports and other activities. In many cases, USDA can provide the reimbursement for these after-school foods through programs like the Afterschool Snack and Supper Programs.

Fourth, the new school meal standards reflect a strong dose of common sense, and will be implemented by the Department accordingly. In fact, the Department had anticipated some modifications and other allowances would be required for a change of this size and scope. More specifically, if a school encounters significant hardships employing the new calorie requirements, we stand ready to work with them quickly and effectively to remedy the situation with additional flexibilities. We look forward to your continued input in that process.

As the new school year begins, implementation of these standards is generally proceeding smoothly across the country, representing an important step towards combating a growing obesity problem that has left one in three American kids overweight or obese. This is a serious, national problem that puts our children at risk of serious health complications like diabetes and heart disease and threatens to impact our nation's health for decades. If left unaddressed, health experts tell us that our current generation of children may well have a shorter lifespan than their parents. While parents will always have the primary responsibility for instilling our kids with healthy eating habits, common sense tells us that taxpayer-funded school lunches should be complementing those efforts.

Accompanying this letter as attachments are additional fact sheets that explain in greater detail the afterschool nutrition program options available to schools, as well as additional clarifying details regarding the calorie requirements. Please share this information with all local program operators as appropriate.

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Attachment