

# Healthier School Meals: A Summary of the New USDA Standards for School Breakfast and Lunch

## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE NEW RULE

**Increases the Amount  
of Fruits, Vegetables,  
and Whole Grains**

**Limits Saturated Fat  
and Sodium**

**Creates New  
Standards for Offer  
versus Serve**

**Phases in Changes to  
the School Breakfast  
Program**

**Increases Food and  
Labor Costs**

**Requires a Food-Based  
Menu Planning  
Approach**

**Establishes New Age/  
Grade Group  
Categories**

**Improves State  
Oversight of the Meal  
Programs**

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## Overview

On January 25, 2012, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued its final rule on school meal nutrition standards, *Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs*. The rule, which goes into effect starting in the 2012-2013 school year (SY), is intended to revise the meal patterns and nutrition requirements for consistency with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

The new standards are extraordinarily important to the health and learning of America's school children. Nearly 32 million children eat lunch at school every day; more than 20 million of them are low-income children whose families are struggling to make ends meet and who receive free or reduced-price meals. School meals are crucial to these children, and the new standards will go a long way to remedy nutritional shortfalls and help address the nation's obesity problem.

Based on the comment process, USDA has addressed in the final rule some of the practicality and cost issues, while striving for consistency with the Institute of Medicine's recommendations. The increased funding for the school lunch reimbursement (\$1.5 billion), combined with the income or savings to school food authorities from the other provisions of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, should help achieve this goal, encourage schools' compliance with the new rules, and encourage increased participation in school meals. USDA changes from the proposed rule to the final rule included a phased-in implementation of breakfast changes and elimination of the proposed meat/meat alternate requirement for breakfast.

Overall, the rule requires schools to offer more fruits, vegetables, and whole grain-rich foods; offer only fat-free or low-fat (1 percent) fluid milk; limit saturated fat and sodium; minimize trans fat; limit the calories that can be offered in a meal; and also allows schools to offer tofu as a meat alternate. Schools must plan their menus based on food group requirements rather than nutrient calculations, follow new age/grade group categories, and require students to select a fruit or vegetable being offered at the meal. In addition, USDA now requires more state oversight of the programs.

The remainder of this document provides additional details on the final rule.

## What Is Included In The New Rule?

### **Increases the Amount and Variety of Fruits and Vegetables**

The new rule increases the amount and variety of fruits and vegetables served in school breakfast and lunch. Fruit and vegetable serving requirements have been at least doubled in both programs. The rule also emphasizes variety in fruits and vegetables. For instance, there are weekly requirements for dark green and red/orange vegetable subgroups at lunch.

### **Creates New Standards for Offer versus Serve**

Offer versus serve (OVS) allows students to decline some of the food offered in a school meal in order to allow students the ability to choose the foods they prefer and to reduce food waste. In the final rule, OVS continues to be required for high school lunch and is optional for other age groups for lunch and all age groups for breakfast. In order to reduce plate waste and unnecessary costs, USDA in the final rule adopted the Institute of Medicine's recommendations for OVS for fruits and vegetables. For breakfast, a student may decline one food item only if four items are offered, but must select at least a half cup of the fruit or vegetable. For lunch, which requires five food components, a student may decline two items, but must select at least a half cup of the fruit or vegetable. For example, if the lunch included turkey, mashed potatoes, peaches, a roll, and milk, the student must take at a minimum the turkey, roll, milk, and either a half cup of peaches or mashed potatoes in order for the meal to be reimbursable.

### **Phases-in School Breakfast Changes**

With the exception of milk requirements which went into effect in 2011, the meal requirements for breakfast will be implemented gradually beginning in the 2013-2014 school year (SY) for a number of reasons outlined by USDA, including easing the estimated increase in breakfast costs and minimizing the impacts on program operations. By SY2013-2014, school breakfast programs must implement new requirements for whole grains, calories, trans fat, menu planning, age/grade group categories, and monitoring. By SY2014-2015, programs must implement the new requirements for fruit, sodium, and offer versus serve (OVS). Schools can, and are encouraged to, implement changes before these deadlines, but must notify their state agency if they intend to do so.

### **Increases Food and Labor Costs**

The rule will increase both food and labor costs. The food costs will increase from serving more fruits and vegetables, requiring students to take a fruit or vegetable, and replacing refined grains with whole grains. Labor costs will increase from more on-site preparation and less reliance on prepared foods. USDA estimates that food and labor costs will increase by approximately 5 cents per lunch initially, climbing to about a 10 cent increase when the food group requirements are fully implemented in FY2015. Breakfast costs do not rise appreciably until the phase-ins are fully implemented in FY2015, when the cost of breakfast will increase by 27 cents. The final rule is considerably less expensive than the proposed rule, which would have increased the cost of a breakfast by nearly 52 cents and lunch by 15 cents when fully implemented. The new rule will improve the nutrition quality of the school breakfasts, and create opportunities to expand breakfast programs. As USDA concludes in the rule, "The final rule's less costly breakfast patterns will make it easier for schools to maintain or expand current breakfast programs, and may encourage other schools to adopt a breakfast program."

## What Is Included In The New Rule?

### **Requires Food-Based Menu Planning Approach**

All schools are required to follow a food-based menu planning (FBMP) approach which relies on food requirements (e.g., 1 cup of fruit) rather than nutrient requirements (e.g., a specific amount of vitamin A). No alternate menu planning approach, such as a nutrient-based approach, is allowed. The FBMP approach – currently used by approximately 70 percent of schools – is intended to 1) ensure that all students participating in school meals have access to healthy foods in key food groups; 2) give schools a practical and easy tool for planning nutritious meals; and 3) simplify program management, training, and monitoring by state agencies. Training and technical assistance will be available to help schools transition to this approach.

### **Establishes New Age/Grade Group Categories**

The rule establishes new age/grade groups for menu planning: Grades K-5 (ages 5-10 years), Grades 6-8 (ages 11-13 years), and Grades 9-12 (ages 14-18 years). According to USDA, these categories are consistent with nutritional needs, enable schools to provide age-appropriate meals, and allow reasonable flexibility.

### **Improves State Oversight of School Nutrition Programs**

The proposed rule would increase the frequency and depth of state reviews of school meal programs. For the first time the state reviews would include the School Breakfast Program, and would take place every three years instead of just once every five years. States will analyze a one-week menu cycle and production records to assess compliance with the meal pattern, and average calorie, sodium, trans fat and saturated fat levels in the planned meals. To help schools comply with the new requirements, states must continue to provide technical assistance and take corrective action if needed. The rule also gives states the ability to take fiscal action to enforce compliance of certain requirements. USDA continues to emphasize the need for schools to ensure that there is no overt identification of students receiving free or reduced-price meals.

### **Updates Standards for Menu Planning**

Key changes to the meal pattern and nutrition standards are listed on the next page.

**Visit [www.frac.org](http://www.frac.org) to learn more about the new rule.**

**For additional information, please contact:**

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## Updated Standards for Menu Planning

Key changes to the meal pattern and nutrition standards are listed in the table below.

### Comparison of Key Changes to Current Requirements: School-Aged Children

	Current Requirement	Final Rule
<b>Breakfast</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Requires ½ cup of fruits or vegetables per day.</li> <li>No limits on vegetable type.</li> <li>Can offer one grain and one meat/meat alternate, or two grains, or two meat/meat alternates.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Doubles the amount of fruit and vegetables required to a total of 1 cup of fruits or vegetables per day.</li> <li>The first two cups of vegetables per week must be from the non-starchy vegetable subgroups.</li> <li>Can offer meat/meat alternates in place of grains once the 1 serving daily minimum grain quantity is met.</li> </ul>
<b>Lunch</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Requires ½ to 1 cup of fruits <b>or</b> vegetables per day.*</li> <li>No specifications for vegetable type.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creates separate fruit <b>and</b> vegetable requirements.</li> <li>Increases the fruit and vegetable requirements to:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◇ ¾ to 1 cup of vegetables per day,* <b>and</b></li> <li>◇ ½ to 1 cup of fruits per day.*</li> </ul> </li> <li>Sets weekly requirements for all vegetable subgroups (i.e., dark green, red/orange, legumes, starchy, and other).</li> </ul>
<b>Fruits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No limits on use of juice as a fruit serving (100 percent juice – no sugar added).</li> <li>No limits on added sugars in fruits.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limits juice to no more than half of fruit offerings (100 percent juice – no sugar added).</li> <li>Limits added sugars in fruits.</li> </ul>
<b>Breads, Cereals, &amp; Grains</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whole grains encouraged, not required.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At least half of grains must be whole grain-rich upon implementation; all grains must be whole grain-rich two years post-implementation.</li> </ul>
<b>Meat &amp; Meat Alternates</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does not allow tofu to count as a meat alternate.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allows tofu to count as a meat alternate.</li> </ul>
<b>Fluid Milk</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allows flavored or unflavored whole, reduced-fat (2 percent), low-fat (1 percent), and fat-free milks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Only allows fat-free (flavored or unflavored) or unflavored low-fat (1 percent) milk.</li> </ul>
<b>Calories</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Must meet minimum level.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limits the total calories that can be offered in a meal: must be within minimum and maximum range.</li> </ul>
<b>Sodium</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decreasing levels encouraged.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gradual but major reductions over 10 years.</li> </ul>
<b>Saturated Fat</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat.</li> </ul>
<b>Trans Fat</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No standard for trans fat.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Product must indicate zero grams of trans fat per serving.</li> </ul>

\*The amount required varies by age/grade group.