



Preserve USDA's 2018 final rule *Child Nutrition Programs: Flexibilities for Milk, Whole Grains and Sodium Requirements.*

SNA supports maintaining robust federal nutrition standards to ensure all students receive healthy, well-balanced meals at school. The final rule on school meal flexibilities preserves [strong standards](#), including Target 1 sodium reductions and limits on calories and fat, which ensure meals do not contribute to childhood obesity. Schools are still required to offer students a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grain options and low fat or fat free milk.

[Research shows](#) school meals are healthier than the typical packed lunch, but two million fewer students eat school lunches each day since updated nutrition standards took effect. This menu planning flexibility can help entice students back into the cafeteria and eating the healthy options offered with school meals.

The December 2018 final rule made three changes to school meal standards:

1. **Whole grains:** The rule restored the 2012 mandate that at least half of all grains offered with school meals be whole grain rich. Many schools struggled to meet the 2014 requirement for *all* whole grain rich foods. Few families or restaurants serve only whole grains, and the Dietary Guidelines allows for consumption of some refined grains. Many schools encountered strong regional and cultural preferences for specific items like flour tortillas.

Allowing schools a little leeway to offer a few enriched grain options each week has not compromised whole grain successes. SNA's [2019 School Nutrition Trends Report](#) found 90% of school districts are exceeding the current whole grain mandate and nearly 90% are working to increase student acceptance of whole grains through one or more cited tactics, including student taste tests and the use of white wheat for a lighter, softer texture.

2. **Sodium:** The final rule maintained Target 1 [sodium reductions](#), delayed implementation of Target 2 until July 2024 and eliminated the final target. Schools significantly reduced the sodium content of school meals to meet Target 1 and are working toward Target 2 reductions. Even the Institute of Medicine warned that meeting later targets may not be possible given naturally occurring sodium in foods and other challenges ([School Meals: Building Blocks for Healthy Children, 2010](#)).
3. **Milk:** The final rule allowed schools to offer flavored 1% milk. Schools must continue to meet calorie, fat and sodium limits for school meals, so any nutrient changes resulting from the addition of flavored 1% milk must be offset in other parts of the menu.

Updated nutrition standards for school meals have been a tremendous success overall, but a few overly prescriptive rules resulted in unintended consequences, including reduced student lunch participation, higher costs and food waste. The final rule has helped school menu planners manage these challenges and prepare nutritious meals that appeal to diverse student tastes.