



CHILD NUTRITION REAUTHORIZATION: NUTRITION STANDARDS AGREEMENT

The School Nutrition Association (SNA) worked collaboratively with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), the White House and the Senate Agriculture Committee to reach an agreement to improve nutrition standards for school meals. The agreement preserves strong standards to benefit students while easing some regulatory mandates to alleviate unintended challenges facing school meal programs. The agreement was included in the Senate Child Nutrition Reauthorization bill, the Improving Child Nutrition Integrity and Access Act of 2016.

“SNA was pleased to work alongside USDA in crafting practical solutions to help school nutrition professionals in their ongoing efforts to improve school meal programs for students,” said SNA President Jean Ronnei, SNS. “In the absence of increased funding, this agreement eases operational challenges and provides school meal programs critical flexibility to help them plan healthy school meals that appeal to students.”

AGREEMENT SUMMARY:

WHOLE GRAINS: Under current regulations, all grains offered with school meals must be whole grain rich – down to the croutons on the fresh salad bar. This agreement requires 80% of the grains offered with school meals be whole grain rich, allowing schools to offer occasional servings of enriched grains. The change provides flexibility for schools struggling with product availability and allows schools to make special exceptions to appeal to diverse student tastes and regional preferences for items like white tortillas or biscuits that don’t meet current standards.

SODIUM: Schools have made great strides in reducing sodium to meet Target 1 sodium levels, effective on July 1, 2014. However, school nutrition professionals have warned that later sodium targets will push many healthy options, like low-fat deli sandwiches, soups and salads off the menu, due in part to naturally occurring sodium in foods.

Under the agreement, schools gain two additional years to meet Target 2 limits, which will now take effect on July 1, 2019. Starting in 2019, a study will be conducted to determine whether scientific research supports the final sodium limits (effective July 1, 2022) and whether food companies are capable of preparing foods that meet those limits. The study will also evaluate the impact of Target 2 limits on student lunch participation, food cost, safety and food service operations.

A LA CARTE: *Smart Snacks in School* regulations (effective July 1, 2014) severely limited the items sold in cafeteria a la carte lines, prohibiting the sale of everything from low-fat, whole-grain pizza to salads or hummus with a side of whole grain pretzels. As a result, students have fewer healthy choices in the cafeteria and schools have collected less revenue to offset the higher cost of meeting new regulations. This agreement will establish a working group to examine the impact of a la carte restrictions and recommend to USDA a list of allowable nutrient-dense food exemptions for a la carte sale.

FRUIT AND VEGETABLE MANDATES: The updated regulations required schools to offer students larger servings and a wider variety of fruits or vegetables; however, rules requiring every student to take a fruit or vegetable with every school meal has increased the amount of produce being thrown away in the cafeteria. Although salad bars and sharing tables help reduce food waste by allowing students to select the foods they prefer and share foods they don’t care to eat, some local food safety inspectors have discouraged schools from utilizing them. Under the agreement, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and USDA will establish new guidance, designed for local governments, confirming the safety of and encouraging the use of salad bars and sharing tables.