



SCHOOL
NUTRITION
ASSOCIATION

Feeding Bodies. Fueling Minds.®

Key Questions & Answers

Q How healthy are school meals?

A School meals are now the healthiest meals consumed, with more fresh fruits and vegetables, more whole grains and lean protein and less saturated fat and sodium, and these meals are getting better each and every day. [A recent study](#) – the most comprehensive of its kind, conducted by researchers at Tufts University – shows school meals had the highest nutrition ranking among food consumed from grocery stores, schools, workplaces, restaurants and food trucks and entertainment venues.

Q How many U.S. schools meet Target 1 sodium reduction levels and what are the future targets?

A Virtually all schools that participate in the federal school meals program met the USDA's Target 1 sodium reduction goals for School Year (SY) 2019–20. Review [USDA's sodium reduction target timeline](#).

Q Has participation in the school meals program been impacted since USDA's nutrition standards went into effect?

A Research shows two million fewer students eat school lunches every day since the USDA's nutrition standards went into effect. Healthier food that goes uneaten is contrary to the nutrition goals as envisioned by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) and the USDA. Student acceptance of newly introduced foods must be considered when formulating sodium reduction mandates.

Q Does SNA believe Target 2 sodium reduction regulations are achievable?

A Yes. However, an SY 2021–22 or SY 2022–23 enforcement date for Target 2 sodium reductions is unrealistic and uniform compliance is unachievable. Using the initial sodium reduction effort as a guide, it is clear some schools will need more time to meet the Target 2 requirements. Schools and suppliers need 24-36 months to develop foods and menus that are palatable and that do not negatively impact participation rates. Pandemic supply chain disruptions and shortages have significantly impacted this process. That is why Target 2 sodium goals should not be enforced by USDA until July 2024, as the agency previously directed.

Q What foods frequently served as a part of school meals will be impacted under the Final (Target 3) sodium reduction regulations?

A Under the Final Target, numerous familiar school lunch items will disappear, including pickles or cheese for wraps, sandwiches and burgers and dressing for salads and raw vegetables. Naturally occurring sodium in milk, meats and low-fat cheese would force schools to limit these healthy choices on the menu as well.

Q As sodium is further reduced in school meals, are there other nutrition implications that should be considered?

A Final Target sodium restrictions may inadvertently lead to an inequitable food system, as students who can afford to will bring their preferred foods to school or leave campus to purchase fast food. Unappealing school foods that go uneaten by children who rely on school meals for a significant portion of their daily nutrition will contribute to greater food insecurity and perpetuate the stigma associated with school meals.

Q What do government and NGO nutrition experts say about sodium reduction?

A According to U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) statistics, despite the progress that has been made in making school meals healthier over the last decade, no meaningful progress has been made in reducing public health issues among children, including, obesity, hypertension and diabetes.

Q What do government and NGO nutrition experts say about sodium reduction?

A The Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2020–2025 recognize that sodium reduction is challenging, requiring a joint effort by individuals, the food and beverage industry, and food service and retail establishments. Additionally, the National Academy of Medicine (NAM, formerly the Institute of Medicine) said Final Target sodium reduction goals may not be possible, given expected issues with participation, food costs, safety and foodservice operations, and that an analysis of that criteria should be conducted, and results considered, to determine whether “reasonable” objectives for potential Final Target mandates are even possible.

In addition, The United States District Court has ruled student acceptance is legitimate criteria for developing reasonable, achievable sodium reduction policies for school meals.

Q Does SNA believe Final Target sodium reduction regulations are achievable?

A SNA and its members believe Final Target sodium reduction regulations across the U.S. are unachievable and will have drastic unintended consequences that contravene the overall nutritional progress accomplished in school meals in recent years. Serving foods and meals that meet the Final Target will cause issues with palatability, student participation rates, costs and foodservice operations.

Q Can schools serve meals that have reduced sodium beyond Target 2 requirements?

A Yes! There is nothing that prevents any school from serving meals that reduce sodium beyond Target 2 requirements. A federal policy that empowers and promotes voluntary sodium reduction beyond Target 2, provides options and choices for local schools and preserves the nutrition progress that has been made thus far would ultimately be more successful.

Q What are some of the major concerns regarding sodium reduction expressed by SNA members?

A According to an SNA survey of its membership, only 11% of school nutrition directors anticipate being able to meet the Final Target. Seventy-four percent of respondents are extremely concerned about the impact of these limits on their programs, with a total of 97% expressing concern. Among the challenges to meeting future sodium limits, more than 95% of respondents cited product or ingredient availability, negative impact on student meal participation and naturally occurring sodium in foods such as milk, low-fat cheese and meat.

Q How can we learn more about how sodium reduction in school meals is working and whether additional reductions are possible?

A USDA, working with other stakeholders, should, as recommended by the NAM, conduct a thorough review and cost-benefit analysis of the impact of Target I reductions, as well as conduct an investigation into the feasibility of Final Target sodium reduction mandates for school meals, using NAM criteria, including, but not limited to, participation rates, reformulation feasibility and food costs, food safety and impact on foodservice operations.

