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MAKING **MOO**VES: HOW SCHOOLS ARE EMBRACING NEW MILK CHOICES

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Before we say goodbye to National Dairy Month (June), we're looking at how school districts around the country are implementing the new milk flexibilities provided through the 2025 Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act (WMFHKA). Signed into law in January 2026, the legislation expands the types of milk schools may offer through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). In addition, effective June 8, USDA's final rule, *Expanding Fluid Milk Options in Child Nutrition Programs,* extends the availability of whole and reduced-fat (2%) milk to child nutrition programs beyond school lunch.

**Interviews were conducted prior to June 8, 2026, when the final rule went into effect.*

WHOLE MILK FOR HEALTHY KIDS ACT & USDA'S FINAL RULE: THE DETAILS

When the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act (WMFHKA) was signed into law in January 2026, it expanded options for fluid milk provided in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to include whole and reduced-fat (2%) milk while also allowing school food authorities to exclude the saturated fat from fluid milk when calculating the weekly average requirements. And effective June 8, USDA's final rule expanded these flexibilities beyond the NSLP to include the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and any child nutrition program offering milk to children ages 2 and up, including the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), the Special Milk Program (SMP), the NSLP afterschool snack service and the preschool meal pattern for NSLP and SBP. Further, whole and 2% milk may also now be sold as a compliant beverage for competitive foods (i.e., Smart Snacks) in schools.

Schools are still required to offer at least two different milk options daily.

The fluid milk flexibilities don't stop there. Lactose-free dairy milk is still an option and non-dairy beverages that are nutritionally equivalent to dairy milk may also be offered as an option in the NSLP—great news for students who have milk allergies, lactose intolerance, or dietary or religious preferences that warrant more variety in the milk cooler. The act also expands flexibility in the NSLP by allowing parents, not just doctors, to request non-dairy alternatives for students who require or prefer them.

Schools are still required to offer at least two different milk options daily. These options can be flavored, unflavored or organic. While the saturated fat count is waived, all milk offered must still fit within weekly menu limits for calories, added sugar and sodium.

Why is this important? More flexibility in milk offerings means school nutrition professionals can better meet student preferences, improving consumption of the essential nutrients found in milk that can help support child health outcomes.

Brain health, immune support, bone and muscle health, and childhood growth and development are all supported by dairy's unique nutrient package.

DAIRY MILK: 13 ESSENTIAL NUTRIENTS FOR CHILD HEALTH

Dairy milk delivers thirteen essential nutrients that can help support healthy child development: protein, calcium, potassium, phosphorus, iodine, zinc, selenium, and vitamins A, D, B12, riboflavin, niacin and pantothenic acid. Healthy physical and neurological development can be supported by the nutrition found in dairy milk, which makes milk a critical component in children's diets. These nutrients build healthy bodies and improve health outcomes for children at all growth stages.

Brain health, immune support, bone and muscle health, and childhood growth and development are all supported by dairy's unique nutrient package. Protein supports immune cells and helps the body build and repair muscle tissue, while calcium, phosphorus, zinc, potassium and vitamin D help maintain strong teeth and bones. The B vitamins contained in dairy foods (B12, riboflavin, pantothenic acid, niacin) work to convert the food we consume into fuel for our bodies, and vitamin A plays a role in supporting healthy immune cells as well as keeping eyes and skin healthy.

School meals play a critical role in helping children meet their recommended daily servings of dairy. Studies show that school meals account for an astonishing 77% of total daily dairy milk consumption and 70% of total dairy consumption for low-income children ages 5–18. USDA data from 2017-18 also indicates that foods provided as part of school meals are the richest source of dairy in children's diets and that children who participate in school meals consume more dairy milk than non-participants (along with fruits and vegetables) while also consuming fewer desserts and snacks.

MAKING THE SWITCH: HOW DISTRICTS ARE IMPLEMENTING WHOLE AND 2% MILK

While some school districts are taking a "wait-and-see" approach to implementation, others have already started offering whole and 2% milk to students at lunch and plan to expand the offerings to breakfast (and other programs) now that the final rule is in effect. Many factors inform the decision to update menus: student and parent preferences, product availability/distributor capacity and cold storage capacity, among others.

Tucson Unified School District, Arizona

With just under 40,000 students across 87 schools, Tucson USD is a 100% CEP district serving an average of 23,000 lunches daily. District director Lindsay Aguilar was immediately interested in the opportunity to introduce higher-fat milk options to students to increase milk consumption and decided that a pilot program was the best way to jump into the flexibilities provided by the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act.

"We are a large district, and we like to do pilots before we do large implementations across the whole district," explained Aguilar. "A pilot helps us get a feel for whether [a change] is something the kids are interested in. We are in the first month of our milk pilot so we haven't dived into the data yet, but we will be doing that in coming weeks. Doing this on a small scale will help us decide whether we are going to be replacing a [milk] option or simply offering an additional [higher-fat] option, and that's a decision we will base on pilot data."

Aguilar worked with her staff to select 20 school sites across the district's five

regions to participate in the pilot and partnered with the Dairy Council of Arizona to create educational resources to promote the new program. They also created talking points for school nutrition staff to help them communicate with students and address any questions they might have around the new milk offering. Aguilar decided to hold off on whole milk for now, introducing 2% at lunch to gauge interest in and consumption of a new, higher-fat fluid milk.

"I wanted to start with the 2% versus whole milk at lunch to stay with the slightly lower-fat option," she said. "We are doing this as an additional choice rather than a replacement for now, so at lunch we have fat-free chocolate, fat-free and 1% white, and now 2%. I think the 2% white at breakfast could potentially increase [consumption]."

Tucson USD is participating in a broader school milk pilot designed to evaluate the impact of expanding school milk offerings to include whole and/or 2% milk in school settings. The pilot will gather insights on student selection, preferences, participation and milk consumption. National Dairy Council is leading this effort in partnership with milk processors, school districts and local dairy councils. Results will be shared at the end of 2026.

Treutlen County Schools, Georgia

When the WMFHKA was signed into law it was full steam ahead for school nutrition director Alicia "Red" Barrett, who didn't hesitate to reach out to her milk distributor to start ordering whole milk for her K-12 campus of 1,100 students where the average daily participation (ADP) at lunch is "pretty much 100%" and breakfast isn't far behind at 95%.

"We are a CEP district near Vidalia—where the onions grow—and we source a lot of local products and even grow our own food like collards that we serve in the cafeteria," said Barrett. "Farm to school and tying the education into what we are eating is important. As soon as I saw that the WMFHKA was passed I called my dairy people and said, 'I need whole milk tomorrow!' because I believe in this, that this is what kids need."

The dairy distributor was able to quickly accommodate the district's new milk order, and student response was positive. According to Barrett, the only drawback was the inability to serve the new milk option at breakfast, creating an extra burden for staff who had to switch milk options between meal programs.

"The only obstacle I really had was not being able to serve whole milk at breakfast," said Barrett. "So that resulted in a process of having to restock the milk coolers from breakfast [1% and skim] to the whole milk at lunch, but I pitched in and we got it done."

Barrett is encouraged by the enthusiastic student response to whole milk at lunch, and she's confident she'll see a similar response to a whole milk option at breakfast.

"Students love it, and I got a lot of positive feedback from my athletes," she said. "Kids need fat to help them feel full!"

By the Numbers
Fluid Milk per 8-ounce serving

Whole milk = 3.25% milk fat	Reduced-fat milk = 2% milk fat	Low-fat milk = 1% milk fat	Fat-free (skim) milk = 0% milk fat
152 calories	122 calories	105 calories	83 calories
5 grams saturated fat	3 grams saturated fat	1 gram saturated fat	0 grams saturated fat
12 grams carbs	12 grams carbs	12 grams carbs	12 grams carbs
12 grams sugars	12 grams sugars	12 grams sugars	12 grams sugars
8 grams protein	8 grams protein	8 grams protein	8 grams protein

Harbor Creek School District, Pennsylvania

Like Red Barrett in Georgia, Harbor Creek School District director Mandy Dickerson was eager to take advantage of the milk flexibilities offered through the WMFHKA. Harbor Creek has an enrollment of just over 2,000 students across four sites, with a 54% ADP at lunch and 30% at breakfast. Back in January 2026, Dickerson reached out to the district's milk provider to add whole and 2% milk to her dairy order.

"I grew up on a dairy farm; milk is important to me, and farmers are important to me," said Dickerson. "Milk fat is healthy fat, so when [the WMFKA] passed I reached out to my milk provider right away."

Dickerson and Harbor Creek Schools have a longstanding relationship with their dairy milk provider who is an annual participant in the district's "Thank a Farmer" celebration, where local farmers visit the district to showcase their products. "Students love their milk," said Dickerson.

"This year will be our fourth year of 'Thank a Farmer,' and we have the news coming to do a live broadcast during the event, which is so cool, and such a great way to showcase our local farmers."

Their local milk provider was able to quickly fulfill Dickerson's request, and the transition has been mostly seamless. One early learning curve was students having to learn what the new carton colors meant at the point-of-service, but they quickly got the hang of it. Students still strongly prefer chocolate milk, said Dickerson, but they are also enjoying the whole and 2% white milk available at lunch. Accommodating special diets will also require a little extra planning and ordering.

"I have one girl with a special diet who can only have ten grams of fat per day, and I work very closely with her mom," said Dickerson, who is not planning on keeping 1% milk on the menu after the June 8 rule streamlining milk options across breakfast and lunch takes effect. "That may require a special [dairy] order or just a trip to the store."

Whole Milk FAQ

Q: Does whole milk cause weight gain?

A: A growing body of research shows that whole and reduced-fat milk are not associated with increased risk of overweight or obesity in children, and several studies show neutral or beneficial associations with body composition and cardiometabolic health.

Q: Is the saturated fat in dairy bad for you?

A: The body of research supports that consuming nutrient-dense dairy foods like milk, cheese and yogurt across a range of fat levels is beneficial to neutral when it comes to cardiometabolic health. In general, dietary fat plays an important role in childhood growth by helping support energy, brain development and the absorption of fat-soluble vitamins. Fat in dairy foods is complex and includes a diverse array of over 400 unique fatty acids (short-, medium-, branched- and odd-chain fatty acids) that are linked with health benefits for satiety, gut health and body composition.

Q: What does the science say about full-fat dairy?

A: Emerging research indicates that regardless of fat content, dairy consumption of milk, cheese and yogurt contributes to an overall healthy diet. Whether fat-free, low-fat, reduced-fat or whole, every glass of dairy milk delivers 13 essential nutrients that can help support bone health, immune function, growth and overall child development.

SMART SWAPS

Looking for resources to help navigate evolving nutrition standards? SMART SWAPS makes meal planning easier with menu-planning tools, kid-tested recipes, and educational resources. Visit *Smart-Swaps.com* to get inspired, stay organized and confidently serve nutritious, compliant meals that students will enjoy.

Attica Central School District, New York

Attica Central School District is small—just 1,081 students on two campuses—but newly-installed director Kayla George is making big moves to meet student preferences and increase participation. After taking over as interim director in November, the position became permanent for George in January around the same time the WMFHKA was signed into law. Students and parents were immediately interested in seeing higher-fat milk at school.

"There were lots of general inquiries via Facebook from parents who had heard about [the WMFHKA], and our business office also received a few calls from dairy farmers whose children are students," said George, who decided to start exercising the flexibility by introducing whole milk at lunch. "I gave it a few weeks before jumping in, until about mid-February, and our distributor had [whole milk] available immediately."

Since taking over as director, George has seen a 10% increase in participation over the previous school year; Attica CSD is a CEP district, in addition to New York state offering universal breakfast and lunch. Program participation is strong; participation is 72.2% at lunch and 62.4% at breakfast, where George estimates she's capturing 50–60 more students at breakfast than in the previous school year.

Nestled in a rural farming community, many of Attica's students live on a farm or are in some way connected with the

agricultural community, which was one of the drivers of George's decision to add whole milk to the lunch menu next to 1% plain and 1% chocolate milk.

"I'd say at least 75% of our student body are dairy farm or agricultural kids," said George. "We have a very active FFA [Future Farmers of America] and many afterschool activities that are agriculture adjacent. I was apprehensive about placing a new milk order immediately after the WMFHKA because I thought, 'Is this going to stick?' and I didn't want to offer the students something and then have to take it away."

When asked about implementation challenges, George cited the early lack of clarity about whether milk could be offered only at lunch. After some initial confusion, her state agency was able to provide guidance and clarity on compliance. With the final rule going into effect June 8, George is monitoring student preferences and deciding what next school year's milk order might look like.

"Since we added the whole [milk], we are seeing a decrease in the amount of 1% milk we need," she said. "I am considering going with whole and 2% next year, I just want to make sure I'm not excluding anyone. So far, the students really do prefer the higher-fat milk products."

FORECASTING: WHAT'S NEXT?

We may not be done with changes to the lunch tray quite yet. While we are in a "wait-and-see" period for how the updated Dietary Guidelines for Americans might affect school nutrition regulations, the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act and USDA's final rule are providing schools with greater flexibility in menu planning.

The expanded milk options help districts better meet student preferences and aligns offerings with the milk varieties students are most likely to consume at home. In fact, whole and 2% milk accounted for 84% of all fluid milk sales over the past year. It remains to be seen how dairy milk formulations might change to continue to meet student preferences (e.g., flavored milk) while also staying within the calorie, sugar and sodium limits.

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Not all school districts are moving to implement higher-fat dairy milk into their programs yet. Some directors reported interest in the increased flexibilities but cited a variety of reasons as to why they are not changing their milk order—at least for now. These reasons included:

- Waiting for the final rule to expand milk options to breakfast
- Lack of student/parent interest
- Maintaining lower saturated fat levels
- Product availability/distributor capacity
- Cost increases that are not offset with an increased reimbursement