

Healthy Eating Research

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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Healthier school meals would improve child health and boost food service revenue

Report finds aligning school meals with latest federal dietary guidelines could benefit millions

(Durham, N.C., February 3, 2023)—Strong nutrition standards for school meals would benefit students by improving their nutrition and health, food security, and academic performance and would benefit schools by boosting meal participation and food service revenue, according to a new report from Healthy Eating Research (HER), a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The new report, called a rapid [Health Impact Assessment \(HIA\)](#) on school meal nutrition standards, examines what kind of impact updated nutrition standards that are aligned with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) could have on schools and kids. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) just announced new nutrition standards that would take a *gradual and incremental* approach to align school meals with the DGA.

According to the research reviewed for this HIA, there is **strong evidence** that improving nutrition standards in school meals to align with the DGA would:

- Result in healthier meals being served.
- Improve students' overall diet quality.
- Reduce overweight and obesity among students.

There is **moderate evidence** that improving nutrition standards in school meals to align with the DGA would:

- Increase student participation in school meal programs.
- Increase school food service revenue.
- Reduce food insecurity.
- Improve academic outcomes.

Over 29 million students were receiving school lunches in 2019 (before pandemic-era waivers that made school meals available to all students), with 74% of participating children receiving

free or reduced-price meals based on their household incomes. About 15 million children received school breakfasts; of these, over 83% were receiving free or reduced-price meals.

“School breakfast and lunch programs serve tens of millions of children every day, all of whom could benefit from healthier school meals. Our research shows aligning school meals with the latest dietary guidelines could significantly improve children’s health and wellbeing and also benefit school meal programs by increasing participation and revenue,” said Megan Lott, MPH, RDN, deputy director of HER. “The rule released today by USDA is a step in the right direction, but the final rule should fully align with the DGA so our children can benefit from the positive health impacts as demonstrated in our HIA.”

Differences Between USDA’s Proposed Rule and What Was Studied in HIA

	USDA Proposed Rule	HIA <i>(Full alignment with the DGA)</i>
Whole Grains	Emphasize products that are primarily whole grain, with the option for occasional non-whole grain products	Require 100% of grains to be whole grain-rich
Sodium	Incrementally reduce weekly sodium limits over many school years	Require two to three interim and final sodium targets to align with the DGA
Added Sugars	Limit added sugars in certain high-sugar products, and then later across the weekly menu	Limit added sugars to no more than 10% of total calories in weekly menus

HER recommends USDA take the following actions to make the upcoming changes as successful as possible:

1. **Update school meal nutrition standards to fully align with the DGA**, including by implementing an added sugar limit on weekly menus and strengthening sodium and whole-grain requirements.
2. **Ensure all schools have the necessary resources to implement the updated standards**, including funds to support training, technical assistance, and updates to school kitchen equipment.
3. **Expand access to school meals for all children.** Pandemic-era waivers that allowed for universal school meals have since expired, but some states have made the measure permanent. Research on these statewide programs has shown that universal school meals [increase school meal participation, improve students’ diet quality and attendance, and reduce food insecurity.](#)

“It’s vital that we make school meals as healthy as possible because some students receive up to half of their daily calories from school meals. Healthier school meals mean better outcomes

for our children, schools, healthcare system, and communities,” said Jamie Bussel, MPH, senior program director at RWJF, which funded the research. “That means following the DGA and limiting sugars and sodium and increasing whole-grains. The final rule must be stronger.”

In the HIA, HER called for more research on the relationships between strong school meal nutrition standards and short- and long-term health outcomes, stigma surrounding school meal participation and mental health outcomes, and stigma surrounding school meal participation and academic outcomes.

This is the second HIA conducted by HER—the [first was done in 2020](#) to evaluate the impact of rolling back school meal nutrition standards, a measure that was ultimately not enacted.