

USDA ANNOUNCES NUTRITION STANDARDS FOR FEDERALLY-FUNDED SCHOOL MEALS THAT WILL LIMIT ADDED SUGARS AND SALT LEVELS FOR THE FIRST TIME



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Today, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Tom Vilsack announced [major steps](#) to promote the health of America's children through federally-funded school meals that will contain lower levels of sugar and salt. On April 24, 2024, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) published the final rule titled [Child Nutrition Programs: Meal Patterns Consistent With the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#), which is the next step in continuing the science-based improvement of school meals and other USDA child nutrition programs (CNPs). The changes are based on a comprehensive review of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025*, input from agricultural industry members, school administrators, and the public on the CNP meal patterns, and lessons learned from prior rulemakings.

The updated nutrition standards for school meals will include less sugar and flexibility with menu planning between fall 2025 and fall 2027. The USDA arrived at these changes after listening closely to public feedback and considering the latest science-based recommendations from the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

The final rule also reduces sodium in children's' meals, although not by the 30% [first proposed in 2023](#). Instead, this final rule implements a single sodium reduction in the school lunch and breakfast programs and commits to studying the potential associations between sodium reduction and student participation in those CNPs.

In adopting new guidelines, the Biden Administration is advancing its goal of fighting child obesity and improving nutrition by aligning U.S. dietary guidelines with the USDA's School Breakfast Program (SBP) and its National School Lunch Program (NSLP) programs. NSLP is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential childcare institutions. It provides children with nutritionally balanced, low-cost, or free lunches each school day. The program was established under the National School Lunch Act and signed by President Harry Truman in 1946.

SBP reimburses states for operating nonprofit breakfast programs in schools and residential childcare institutions. USDA's Food and Nutrition Service administers the SBP at the federal level, state education agencies administer it at the state level, and local school food authorities operate the program in schools.

These programs are critical today, as data show nearly one in five children across America live in households without consistent access to adequate food. Peer-reviewed scientific studies have linked school meals and healthy diets to academic success. For example, data show that, on average, students who eat school breakfast achieve 17.5% higher scores on standardized math tests and attend 1.5 more days of school per year. Studies have also demonstrated that school meal programs play an important role in supporting obesity prevention, overall student health, and academic achievement by improving children's diets and combatting hunger.

To help America's next generation with a healthy head start, the federal SBP and NSLP programs today provide free or price-reduced breakfasts to more than 15 million students and almost 5 billion lunches to nearly 30 million students every day [at a cost of](#) approximately \$22.6 billion per year. In the case of lunches, it costs the federal government less than four dollars and fifty cents (\$4.50) per student to feed that participating child a healthy lunch every school day for the entire school year.

The nutrition standards will be phased in from fall 2025 to fall 2027, including the first nationwide limits on added sugars in school meals. While this rulemaking is effective July 1, 2024, the USDA is gradually phasing in required changes over time so that producers and program operators have time to adjust to the new guidelines. Menu changes resulting from the new rulemaking are not required until school year 2025-26, although many states have indicated they will move more quickly to comply with the lower sugar and salt levels.

For example, dairy processors are ready for a new rule limiting added sugars in school chocolate milk. Thirty-seven school milk processors across America, representing more than 90% of school milk volume, have committed to meeting USDA's new sugar limits. Although numerous studies suggest that dairy milk is a good source of nutrients, research also has found that flavored milk is the top source of added sugar in both the school lunch and breakfast programs. Added sugars contribute calories without essential nutrients, and excessive sugar intake can lead to weight gain and type 2 diabetes, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The International Dairy Foods Association (IDFA) [organized](#) the Healthy School Milk Commitment last year after the USDA proposed reducing sugar in flavored school milk. Participating companies pledge to provide school milk with no more than 10 grams of added sugar per 8-fluid-ounce serving — the USDA's new standard.

When IDFA announced the commitment, flavored milk offered in schools was already at 8.2 grams of added sugar per serving, and within months, processors had cut that average to 7.6 grams per serving. Participating processors include Cloverland Dairy, Dairy Farmers of America, Danone North America, Galliker's Dairy, Harrisburg Dairies, HP Hood, Marburger Farm Dairy, Maryland & Virginia Milk Producers Cooperative Association, Pocono Mountain Dairies, Schneider's Dairy, Upstate Niagara Cooperative Inc., Turner Dairy Farms, and Wawa.

Staying abreast of the sugar rule is essential to the industry and school children. According to the IDFA, low-fat flavored milk is the beverage most consumed by students regardless of grade. It is also important to note that the USDA's new rules do not change the types of milk cafeterias may serve. Schools may offer skim, 1%, flavored or plain milk; however, as an additional hedge against child obesity, unflavored milk must be offered at every meal service.

With the finalization of these guidelines, NOW is the time for food industry members who participate in this multi-billion dollar space to plan how best to achieve operational compliance.

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To learn more about the latest USDA nutrition standards, contact the GrayRobinson national [Food Law Team](#) at 866.382.5132 or foodlaw@gray-robinson.com.

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