

# Helping School Meals Make the Grade

## THE NEED TO IMPROVE SCHOOL FOODS

Over the past four decades, childhood obesity rates in the United States have risen rapidly, more than quadrupling among children ages 6 to 11 and more than tripling among teens.<sup>1</sup> Today, more than 23 million children and teens are overweight or obese, which places them at increased risk for serious diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer and stroke.<sup>2</sup> In addition, tens of thousands of students and staff have been sickened by outbreaks in schools caused by contaminated meat, poultry and leafy greens over the past 40 years.<sup>3</sup>

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs provide meals to tens of millions of children each day, accounting for up to one-half of those students' daily calories.<sup>4,5</sup> However, more than 90 percent of schools serve meals that do not even meet the minimum national school meal standards, which were established in 1995 and do not reflect current nutrition science.<sup>6</sup> Research shows that students who do not have reliable, healthy meals in kindergarten are noticeably behind their peers in reading and math by the third grade.<sup>7</sup> Improving the standards for school meals will help millions of kids get the nutrients they need to grow, learn and succeed.

## NEW POLICIES PROMISE SAFE AND HEALTHY MEALS

The passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act in December 2010 marked major progress in helping to safeguard and improve children's health. The law calls for considerable improvements to the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs, including the first

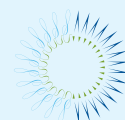


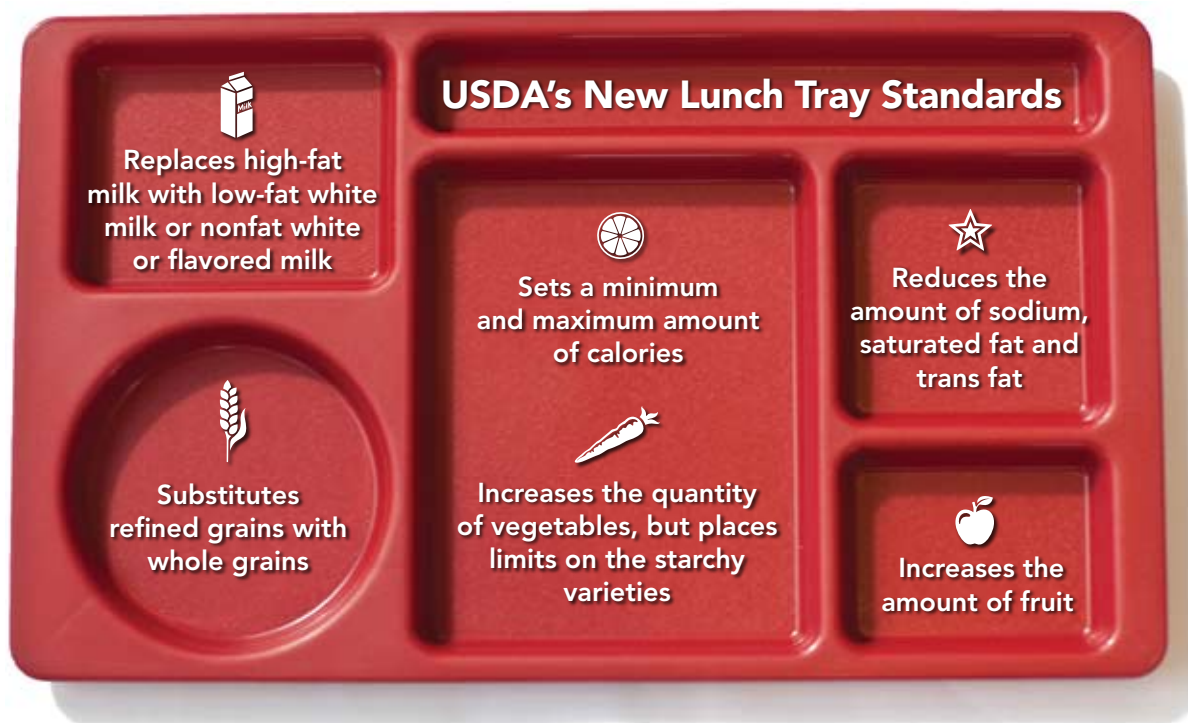
significant funding increase in more than 30 years to help schools offer healthier meals. It also requires that national standards for all foods and beverages served and sold in schools are updated, stronger food safety measures are implemented and training opportunities for school food service workers are increased.

Shortly after the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act was passed, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) proposed a rule to update national nutrition standards for school meals to bring them in line with expert recommendations from the Institute of Medicine, the health arm of the National Academy of Sciences. Once these standards are finalized and implemented, school cafeterias across the country will be offering more fruits, vegetables and whole grains on lunch trays, while limiting calories and reducing the amounts of unhealthy fats and sodium.

## FULFILLING THE PROMISE

The passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act and USDA's efforts to improve standards for the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs represent significant progress in helping schools offer students more nutritious meals. However, to fulfill the promise of providing students with safe and healthy meals, we need to ensure that schools are equipped and empowered to implement and sustain these changes over time.





### HEALTHY, HUNGER-FREE KIDS ACT OF 2010<sup>8</sup>

- Requires USDA to update nutrition standards for school meals based on the most current *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*
- Increases federal funding by six cents for every school lunch that meets updated nutrition standards
- Gives USDA the authority to set science-based nutrition standards for “competitive foods”—those foods and beverages sold in schools outside of school meal programs through vending machines or à la carte lines
- Establishes a program to create professional standards for food service directors with requirements for education, training and certification
- Provides grants and technical assistance to establish farm-to-school programs that bring in food from local farms, and also funds training for food service workers and kitchen equipment purchases
- Enhances the safety of food in schools by requiring improved procedures for recalling potentially contaminated products and extending food safety requirements throughout campus
- Ensures that the foods schools receive from USDA meet the most current *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and requires USDA to help schools obtain healthier foods

*The Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods Project provides nonpartisan analysis and evidence-based recommendations on policies that impact the safety and healthfulness of school foods. Learn more at [www.HealthySchoolFoodsNow.org](http://www.HealthySchoolFoodsNow.org).*

<sup>1</sup> Cynthia L. Ogden et al., “Prevalence of High Body Mass Index in U.S. Children and Adolescents, 2007-2008,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 303, no. 3 (2010): 242-249.

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Overweight and Obesity: Health Consequences,” [www.cdc.gov/obesity/causes/health.html](http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/causes/health.html) (accessed February 3, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas A. Daniels et al., “Foodborne Disease Outbreaks in United States Schools,” *Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal* 21, no. 7 (2002): 623-628.

<sup>4</sup> “National School Lunch Program: Total Participation,” Data as of December 2, 2010, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, [www.fns.usda.gov/pd/01slfypart.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/01slfypart.htm) (accessed January 4, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Mary Story, “The Third School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study: Findings and Policy Implications for Improving the Health of U.S. Children,” *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 109, no. 2 (2009): S7-S13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Diana F. Jyoti, Edward A. Frongillo, and Sonya J. Jones, “Food Insecurity Affects School Children’s Academic Performance, Weight Gain, and Social Skills,” *Journal of Nutrition* 135, no. 12 (2005): 2831-2839.

<sup>8</sup> Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. 111th Congress, Second Session 2010, S. 3307, [frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=111\\_cong\\_bills&doid=f:s3307enr.txt.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=111_cong_bills&doid=f:s3307enr.txt.pdf) (accessed January 28, 2011).