

The Use of Policy Riders to Undermine School Meal Nutrition Standards

A CASE STUDY

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BACKGROUND

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010 allowed the US Department of Agriculture to update school meal nutrition standards to align with the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

These updated standards increased required servings of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and limited levels of sodium and saturated fat – altogether improving the dietary quality of school meals.

National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs are funded annually by Congress. Funding bills often include additional provisions called “riders” that influence funded policies and programs.

STUDY OBJECTIVE

Understand how riders, defined as policy changes added to federal spending bills, have been used to interfere with implementation of school meal nutrition standards.

METHODS

1 Evaluated all government spending bills from 2011-2025 published by the Congressional Research Service for the presence of riders.

- Categorized riders by nutrition standard impacted
- Conducted a content analysis of riders and how they evolved.

2 Reviewed research and advocacy files to understand the impact of riders.

RESULTS

The 14 annual spending bills included 15 finalized riders.

Riders were evenly distributed across 5-year periods.

Finalized riders most often affected fruit/vegetable requirements (47% of riders), followed by sodium limits (33% of riders), whole grain requirements (27% of riders), and milk requirements (20% of riders).

CONCLUSIONS

Spending bill riders have consistently been a method for weakening standards across food categories.

Riders have prevented the full implementation of the HHFKA.

