

10-Year Anniversary of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA)

On December 13th, 2010 President Barack Obama signed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) into law, a monumental bill that strengthened nutrition standards for meals, snacks, and beverages provided through the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, affecting 30 million children. HHFKA made significant strides to increase access and provide nutritious food to children.

This month, we celebrate 10 achievements of the HHFKA and make recommendations for how Congress and the Biden administration can build off the HHFKA's success to ensure schools have the tools and resources needed to provide every student with nutrition to help them thrive.



HEALTHIER MEALS

1. Updated meal patterns to ensure kids get a variety of fruits and vegetables every week.

🌱 **Next, recommit to the 2012 nutrition standards and meal patterns**, including food components and quantities. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) proposed to weaken these requirements earlier this year, potentially allowing schools to offer more French fries in place of vegetables like carrots and cucumbers.

2. Set sodium-reduction targets for schools to reach safe levels of sodium.

🌱 **Next, reinstate and update the tiered sodium-reduction targets** within a feasible timetable to align sodium in school meals with what the 2019 Dietary Reference Intakes establish is safe for kids. USDA has gone in the opposite direction by delaying the second sodium-reduction target and eliminating the third.

3. Required all grains offered in schools contain at least 51 percent whole grains (whole grain-rich).

🌱 **Next, re-commit to all whole grain-rich grains.** USDA weakened this standard in 2018, and after the rule was vacated by a federal court, has proposed a new rule that would allow schools to cut their whole grain offerings in half.

4. Set age-appropriate calorie and saturated fat limits and removed artificial trans fat. The age-appropriate calorie ranges were intended to limit certain foods like ones high in added sugars, however school breakfast remains far too sugary with offerings like donuts, cookies, cinnamon rolls, and others.

🌱 **Next, it's time to establish an added sugar limit** consistent with the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) and **set a timetable for eliminating the use of unsafe non-nutritive sweeteners and artificial food dyes.**

5. Improved the nutritional quality of breakfast and lunch overall.

🌱 **Next, improve the nutritional quality of summer meals offered free to children and teens from families in need by aligning nutrition standards with the DGAs**, consistent with those for breakfast and lunch served during the school year.



HEALTHIER SNACKS AND BEVERAGES (COMPETITIVE FOODS)

6. Established strong nutrition standards for foods served outside the reimbursable meal, often referred to as competitive foods. Set a total sugar standard for snacks and removed full-calorie soda from schools. Set limits on how often meal items could be served a la carte.
- ✔ Next, improve the nutritional quality of snacks by updating the total sugar standard to an added sugar standard, consistent with the DGAs. USDA proposed loosening the limit on meal items served a la carte, which would allow more burgers, fries, pizza, and cookies taken instead of the balanced meal. USDA must retain these limits.



INCREASED ACCESS

7. Allowed schools in high poverty areas to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students through the Community Eligibility Provision.
- ✔ Next, allow all schools to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students, which would improve food security and eliminate shame and stigma associated with receiving free meals.



IMPROVED FINANCING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

8. Provided a performance-based increase for meals that meet nutrition standards (HHFKA provided a 6-cent—now 7-cent due to inflation—increased reimbursement per meal for schools to meet the updated standards).
- ✔ Next, re-assess whether the increase is sufficient for schools to meet stronger standards, and if not, increase the reimbursement.
9. Increased Technical Assistance on nutrition standards. USDA established a program to help schools meet the stronger standards.
- ✔ Next, invest in more technical assistance and provide more kitchen equipment grants for upgrades, repairs, and maintenance.



IMPROVED TRANSPARENCY

10. Updated Local Wellness Policies which are policies that school districts commit to for improving the school environment.
- ✔ Next, strengthen local wellness policies in a number of ways, particularly on junk food marketing which the current standard is too weak and include seat time/mealtime recommendations to ensure students have sufficient time to eat (e.g. 20 minutes in seat), and reasonably timed meal periods (e.g. lunch after 11am and before 2 pm).

HHFKA is considered one of the most important public health victories

Research shows that the updated nutrition standards could prevent up to two million cases of childhood obesity and save up to \$792 million in healthcare costs over 10 years.^[i] Further, the risk of childhood obesity decreased among children in poverty by half over five years.^[ii] Stronger nutrition standards help reduce disparities in healthy food access. Prior to HHFKA, students in more affluent and large schools were more likely to have access to healthier foods than those in poorer and small schools in states with weaker standards than states with stronger standards.^[iii]

The COVID-19 pandemic has made school meals even more important, and more challenging. As a result of the economic impact of COVID-19, more children are likely to qualify for free or reduced-priced school meals. Given that the percentage of people experiencing food insecurity has increased, access to nutritious meals will remain a critical factor in combatting food insecurity.

[i] Gortmaker SL, Wang YC, Long MW, et al. Three Interventions that Reduce Childhood Obesity Are Projected to Save More Than They Cost to Implement. *Health Aff.* 2015;34:1932-9. doi:10.1377/hlthaff.2015.0631.

[ii] Kenney, EL, Barrett JL, Bleich SN, et al. Impact Of The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act On Obesity Trends. *Health Aff.* 2020;39:1122-1129. doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2020.00133

[iii] Terry-McElrath YM, O'Malley PM, Johnston LD. Foods and beverages offered in US public secondary schools through the National School Lunch Program from 2011-2013: Early evidence of improved nutrition and reduced disparities. *Prev Med.* 2015;78:52-8. doi: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2015.07.010.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study (SNMCS), the first nationally-representative study to assess school meals after implementation of nutrition standards established by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA), found that as a result of the law:

- Nutritional quality of meals significantly increased. The Healthy Eating Index score (HEI-2010), a measure of nutrition quality, increased 41 percent—from 57.9 to 81.5 out of a possible 100 for NSLP lunches. The HEI-2010 score for SBP breakfasts increased 44 percent—from 49.6 to 71.3 out of a possible 100.
- Significant progress has been made on providing whole grains in place of refined. The HEI-2010 score for refined grains more than doubled from 46 to 96 percent of the maximum score, indicating a dramatic decrease in the concentration of refined grains in NSLP lunches over time (a higher score reflects a reduction in less healthy refined grains). Similar to NSLP lunches, the score for refined grains for SBP breakfasts more than doubled from 45 to 95 percent of the maximum score.
- Significant progress on sodium reduction. The vast majority of schools (85 percent) met or were close to meeting the first sodium-reduction target (Target 1) in the first year that the target was required (SY2014-2015).
- A majority of school meals met daily meal components, especially for fruits and vegetables. At least 80 percent of daily breakfast and lunch menus met the meal pattern quantity requirements.
- Schools with healthier meals experienced higher participation rates. Rates of student NSLP participation were significantly higher in schools with HEI-2010 NSLP scores in the third and highest quartiles (that is, the top half) compared to the lowest quartile.
- Plate waste was not negatively impacted. The study found the same amount of plate waste after HHFKA compared to findings from studies prior to HHFKA.

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