



## **USDA Proposes Standards to Provide Healthy Food Options in Schools**

### **Questions & Answers**

### **February 1, 2013**

#### **What would these proposed standards do?**

The proposed standards will allow schools to offer healthier snack foods for our children, while limiting junk food served to students. Students will still be able to buy snacks that meet common-sense standards for fat, saturated fat, sugar, and sodium, while promoting products that have whole grains, low fat dairy, fruits, vegetables or protein foods as their main ingredients.

It is important to note that USDA has no role in regulating foods brought from home. The proposed standards do not apply to any foods brought to school in bagged lunches, or for birthday parties and special events, including after-school bake sales and fundraisers.

#### **Why are these standards necessary?**

Nearly one third of children in America are at risk for preventable diseases like diabetes and heart disease due to being overweight or obese. If left unaddressed, health experts tell us that this generation may be the first to live shorter lives than their parents.

Students across the country are now getting healthier school lunches with more fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy based on scientific recommendations for nutrition. Yet for most teens and a growing percentage of elementary students, items offered a la carte and in vending machines still lack healthy options. Many students consume at least one snack food a day at school.

Parents are working hard to ensure their children grow up healthy and their efforts should not be undone when their kids go to school. Our children's ability to learn in the classroom and reach their fullest potential depends on what we do right now to secure their future.

#### **How did USDA determine the proposed standards?**

USDA solicited input from Federal child nutrition program stakeholders, including nutrition and health professionals, parents, academia, industry, interest groups, and the public, and reviewed expert recommendations from sources such as the Institute of Medicine (IOM) Report and the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

We also conducted a broad review of nutrition standards developed by other entities including the HealthierUS Schools Challenge standards; existing State and local school nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold in competition with school meals; and existing voluntary standards

The contents of this guidance document do not have the force and effect of law and are not meant to bind the public in any way. This document is intended only to provide clarity to the public regarding existing requirements under the law or agency policies.

and recommendations that have been developed by various organizations, such as the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation.

### **Aren't states, schools, and the food industry already doing a lot to improve food in schools?**

States, schools and the food industry have taken notable steps to improve the whole school food environment. With bi-partisan support, Congress required the Department to establish nutritional standards for all food sold at schools, including vending machines and ala carte lines, under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) as a complement to the improved school meal standards for breakfast and lunch. National polls also show nearly 80% of Americans support better nutrition standards for all food sold in schools.

Additionally, leading research has shown that while improvements are being made, policies vary widely from state to state and from school to school. Setting a national baseline will allow every student to enjoy the benefits of healthy snack food choices at school while providing greater certainty for food and beverage companies.

### **Some schools are still adapting to the new school meal standards. Are they equipped to deal with additional change right now?**

We always anticipated the implementation process for the new school meal patterns would be a challenge for some schools. As such, recently the Department provided significant new flexibility to help schools make a smoother transition into the new requirements. We continue to closely monitor the implementation of the new meal patterns and we stand ready to troubleshoot and assist schools throughout the process.

With respect to the new requirements proposed today, the rule allows for a transition time for schools, the food industry and other stakeholders to make the necessary adjustments to the school food environment.

### **Do the proposed standards create additional burden for schools?**

At least 39 states currently have some kind of competitive foods standard already in place. In addition, thousands of schools have already taken voluntary steps to enact the proposed competitive food standards. USDA's proposal establishes a consistent national baseline that will allow every student to enjoy the benefits of healthy snack food choices while providing greater certainty for food and beverage companies.

Many schools have implemented voluntary standards with little or no loss of revenue, and some schools have reported an increase in revenue after introducing healthier foods. For example, West Virginia requires schools to offer healthier beverages and restrict certain foods and soda, yet the majority of principals report little or no change in revenues from snack foods.

As we have done throughout the implementation of the new school meals standards, USDA will do all we can to simplify any necessary transition for schools, offering training and technical assistance to States and schools to address challenges as they arise.

Exact revenue dollar figures vary by individual states, school districts and individual schools. But USDA's review of the existing evidence on revenue impacts indicates that on a national scale, any changes would most likely be very minimal, in the range of one percent of total school food revenues.

### **How will food and beverages options be impacted by the proposed standards? What products will be in, and what products will be out?**

First, it is important to note that the proposed standards do **not** apply to foods brought to school in bagged lunches, or for activities such as birthday parties, holidays, and other celebrations.

The intent of the proposed standards is not to limit popular snack items, but instead to provide snack foods for students that are healthier. For example, chips would still be allowed, in healthier versions such as baked tortilla chips, reduced-fat corn chips, and baked potato chips.

Tens of thousands of schools are already moving in this direction through voluntary initiatives like the Alliance for a Healthier Generation (AHG) and USDA's HealthierUS Schools Challenge. USDA used the AHG nutritional baseline as a model in developing these new standards.

Additionally, research shows that industry is already adjusting to parents' desire for healthier snack foods. Many products being sold in schools already meet the proposed standards or are very close to these standards.

### **How do the proposed standards affect fundraising by school groups?**

According to USDA research, more than half of all schools currently do not allow fundraisers that sell sweet or salty foods. And while only a small amount of snack foods are sold by school groups, USDA recognizes that revenues from school stores, vending machines and occasional fundraisers can play an important role in supporting student clubs, parent teacher organizations, and booster groups. That is why the proposed standards offer a significant amount of flexibility on food items sold by these groups:

- All foods that meet the proposed standards could be sold during fundraisers during school hours.
- The proposed standards would not apply to items sold during non-school hours, weekends or off-campus fundraising events, such as concessions during sporting events and school plays.

USDA is also seeking comment on how state agencies can best establish parameters to appropriately exempt occasional school-sponsored fundraisers.

**Do these standards prevent children from bringing cookies to school on their birthday or special event?**

USDA has no role in regulating foods brought from home.

These standards only affect foods that are sold on school campus during the school day. Time honored traditions like treats for birthdays, or foods at an afterschool sporting event, are not subject to these standards.

**My school/state has its own standards for snack foods sold in schools. How will they be affected by what USDA is doing?**

The proposed standards are the minimum requirements for schools. States and schools that have stronger standards than what is being proposed will be able to maintain their own policies.

**How will the foods provided as part of the school meal, but sold separately as a la carte items, be affected by these standards?**

The Department is seeking comment on several potential options to address how best to apply nutritional standards to individual food items sold a la carte that are also provided as part of the school meal. Our goal is to develop a balanced policy that is feasible for schools to implement and that supports healthy choices for students.

**Will these standards significantly affect the profitability of small businesses that sell products in schools?**

Most food companies have diverse product portfolios with healthy options that do meet the proposed standards. USDA estimates the proposed standards' impact on the sales of food items would be very limited. The sale of snack food in schools represents less than one percent of all food shipments from U.S. food manufacturers. In addition, a normal school year consists of about 180 days, which means that during more than half of the year, the child is not limited in the purchase of any one company's products. Again, the proposed standards do not apply to any foods bought off-campus, after school hours or brought to school in bagged lunches.

*USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer. To file a complaint of discrimination, write: USDA, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, Office of Adjudication, 1400 Independence Ave., SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (866) 632-9992 (Toll-free Customer Service), (800) 877-8339 (Local or Federal relay), (866) 377-8642 (Relay voice users).*