

SCHOOL NUTRITION DIETARY ASSESSMENT STUDY II: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Office of Research and Analysis

July 2001

Background

This report summarizes findings of the second School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study (SNDA-II). The study provides up-to-date information on the nutritional quality of meals served in public schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). The last nationally representative study of the NSLP and SBP, SNDA-I, was completed in school year (SY) 1991-92. SNDA-I confirmed that school meals met a variety of important nutrition goals. However, the study also found that school lunches were not consistent with Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommendations for total fat and saturated fat intake. At the time, school food service programs were not required to offer meals that were consistent with the Dietary Guidelines.

Shortly after SNDA-I was published, USDA began work on an initiative to promote consistency with the Dietary Guidelines in the school meals programs. In 1995, the Department launched the School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children (SMI). SMI is designed to improve the nutritional quality of school meals by providing schools with educational and technical resources that can be used to assist food service personnel in preparing nutritious and appealing meals and to encourage children to eat more healthful meals.

Key components of SMI include new nutrition standards for school meals and added flexibility in the procedures used to plan and monitor school menus. The new nutrition standards maintain long-standing goals of providing one-third (lunches) and one-fourth (breakfasts) of

students' daily needs for calories and key nutrients. In addition, the standards include goals for fat and saturated fat content that are consistent with Dietary Guidelines recommendations.

Data from the SNDA-II study provide information on how schools are progressing, in the early stages of SMI, toward meeting USDA's strategic goal of satisfying the SMI nutrition standards by the year 2005. The picture painted by the available evidence is a strong and positive one. In SY 1998-99, when SNDA-II data were collected, breakfasts served in the SBP were already meeting most of the SMI standards. Although there is still work to be done on NSLP meals, schools have made substantial improvements in the nutritional quality of the lunches they are providing and are making good progress toward meeting the SMI standards.

Findings

Between SY 1991-92 and SY 1998-99, there was a meaningful and statistically significant trend toward lower levels of fat and saturated fat and increased levels of carbohydrate in the lunches offered to students, relative to calorie content.

In addition to improvement in overall means, there was a marked increase in the percentage of individual schools that offered lunches that were consistent with Dietary Guidelines recommendations for fat and saturated fat (now the SMI standards).

Program regulations require that the meals selected by (served to) students — not just the meals offered to them — be consistent with SMI standards. Elementary schools are doing somewhat better than secondary schools at meeting this goal. In SY 1998-99, lunches served to students in elementary schools

provided, on average, about 33 per-cent of calories from fat (compared to the SMI standard of no more than 30 percent) and about 12 percent of calories from saturated fat (compared to the standard of less than 10 percent). More than one in five elementary schools met the SMI standard for calories from fat and roughly one in seven met the SMI standard for calories from saturated fat.

By comparison, the average lunch served in secondary schools in SY 1998-99 provided about 35 percent of calories from fat and 12 percent of calories from saturated fat. One in seven secondary schools met the SMI standard for calories from fat; roughly the same percentage met the standard for saturated fat.

Even when the average lunch served to students did not meet SMI standards for calories from fat and saturated fat, many schools offered options that were consistent with these standards. Students in 82 percent of elementary schools and 91 percent of secondary schools had the opportunity to select lunches that were consistent with SMI standards for fat and saturated fat.

Improvements in fat and saturated fat content were achieved without compromising the overall

nutrient contribution of school lunches. Lunches served to students in SY 1998-99 provided more than one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) for all targeted nutrients. Only lunches served in secondary schools, where students' calorie needs are greatest, fell short of providing one-third of the recommended level of calories.

School breakfasts have shown comparable improvements in relative fat and saturated fat content since SY 1991-92. In both elementary and secondary schools, the relative fat content of the average breakfast served in SY 1998-99 was consistent with the SMI standard for calories from fat and came very close to meeting the SMI standard for calories from saturated fat. These improvements came at no cost to the overall nutrient content of school breakfasts. Breakfasts served in SY 1998-99, in both elementary and secondary schools, provided one-fourth or more of the RDA for all targeted nutrients. As was the case in SY 1991-92, however, school breakfasts fell short of providing one-fourth of the recommended level of calories.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all of its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, political beliefs, genetic information, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.)

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write: USDA, Director, Office of Adjudication, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410; or call (866) 632-9992 (Toll-free Customer Service), (800) 877-8339 (Local or Federal relay), or (866) 377-8642 (Relay voice users) or (800) 845-6136 (Spanish Federal-relay). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.