Child Nutrition Reauthorization Priorities:

VOICES FROM THE FIELD
Every decade, Congress reauthorizes the law that governs the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs, referred to as the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act. The latest iteration of the law, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (Public Law 111-296), expired on September 30, 2015, and presents Congress with an opportunity to provide some overdue updates to the legislation.

Specific to the nutritional provisions of the law, Congress must maintain the current sodium 1-target level, 50% enriched whole grain and flavored milk flexibilities as implemented by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

To best illustrate the opposition of superintendents against increased nutritional standards, AASA has compiled feedback from our members to exemplify how these policies will negatively affect our superintendents’ efforts to feed students.

**STATE** | **COMMENTS**
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GA | "Increasing sodium restrictions will cause normal foods students enjoy to be bland and unappealing causing students to bring food from home or seek outside restaurant-style food to be brought on to campus. If we move to 100% whole grains again instead of the current 50% whole grains, this will cause a significant decrease in both breakfast and lunch participation. Keeping whole grains at 50% is much more manageable and school operators can offer a more appealing variety of products to students."
MI | "Since the passing of the stricter nutrition standards our nutrition program participation plummeted, resulting in outsourcing our program to a vendor. The program ran a deficit for many years as a result of poor participation, which we believe was brought on by the stricter requirements. Simply said, students report the food is tasteless and refuse to participate even when they are free. It has resulted in heat and serve meals because it is extremely difficult to do scratch cooking with the strict requirements."
"From my experience, the manufacturers had been having a hard time bringing in products that meet the reduced-sodium limits at first, but now it seems to be a bit better. Students do not like the lower sodium as it definitely has taken a lot of the flavor away from their favorite foods. The next stage of reducing sodium limits would be another struggle with finding the products that meet those limits and again flavor of food would be an issue. What good is making these changes if the students just throw the food away and are still hungry?

We used to say if a child is hungry, they will eat, but that is not what we are seeing in the cafeteria. As for whole grain-rich foods, I think we are at a good place for the most part. Students have gotten used to the whole grain and manufacturers have been able to produce the products we need. At the high school and middle school level, we saw a decrease in participation with whole grain pizza. We also found that whole grain pizza dough was harder to cook and the flavor was not there. We had to request the whole grain waiver for our pizza. This allowed us to go back to the white dough. Participation then increased. In my opinion, we need to leave sodium limits where they are and NOT make another change to decrease the sodium limits. In addition to keeping the whole grain requirements unchanged."

"I agree that meals should be healthy as possible, but I believe moving towards Tier 2 and very soon Tier 3 will have a negative impact that could lead some of our most vulnerable populations at risk for increased hunger (in school and out). Students simply will not eat foods that are not eye appealing and meet a certain flavor expectation, not even hungry children! While it is our responsibility to provide the healthiest of meals, students will not eat foods that they do not enjoy. Students not eating meals provided at school will lead to programmatic issues of decreased meal participation and increased food waste. Both can lead to a wide variety of social and educational concerns in and out of school.

Children who we know are in poverty and do not have access to a wide variety of healthy foods at home, when in the school setting often succumb to peer pressure and will not eat foods that they do not like even when hungry. Under the current guidelines we have worked to meet the nutritional requirements and pre-COVID were starting to build our student meal participation back. Placing more stringent nutritional rules that will lead to an onslaught of issues that will impact one of our most hunger vulnerable populations. The end goal should have our whole student in mind versus attempting to meet a nutritional parameter that will have severe short term and long-term impacts on our children."
"After the onset of the last round of nutrition guideline changes, a few concerns arose. Lunch trays in student cafeterias at the conclusion of a meal period began to take on a different complexion. Even our youngest students exercise choice when it comes to the food they eat. At the end of a meal period, often times, the food that did not appeal to a student winds up being discarded in the trash bin. The student only consumed a small portion of the total meal.

This is in large part due to the ingredients used in preparing the meal and lack of appeal those ingredients have. This presents a significant challenge for students as they will still exercise their own choice in the food they consume. The options they evaluate and ultimate choices they make do not lead to positive outcomes. The scenarios are real. If the food choices are not appealing to the student, they will not participate in the program. If they do not participate in the program, they may, if their parents are able, be bringing a breakfast or lunch from home. The school has no control over the ingredients the parents are using, thus defeating the entire purpose of a "nutritional" school lunch program and certainly a program with potentially more stringent nutritional regulations. If the parents are unable to prepare a breakfast or lunch for their child, the child may choose NOT to eat if they do not like the school meal, even when they are hungry.

This also creates an equity issue as this cycle of choices is especially exacerbated and evident in lower income communities where parents may be working multiple jobs and/or not have the time or means to provide their child with an appropriate meal or purchase more nutritional meal options for their children.

More stringent nutritional regulations placed on federal meals programs could actually drive children away from having the meals they need most in school."