

DATE: September 28, 2012
FROM: School Food Services Section

USDA has asked each state to share a new resource, [Letter to Parents Template](#), to help assist schools in responding to concerns about the school meal changes – specifically those relating to calories and inadequate food. There is a link in the letter providing information from USDA on [“The School Day Just Got Healthier”](#).

In addition to the letter and “The School Day Just Got Healthier” information, below are some updated messages from USDA that you may find helpful as they relate to the new school meal requirements.

- Healthy school meals are a critical investment in our children’s health and the future success of our nation. The previous school meal standards were developed 15 years ago and did not meet current nutritional guidelines.
- The updated, science-based nutrition standards provide significant flexibility for local schools to develop their own menus to ensure that children have the energy they need to learn and be physically active, while reducing their risk for obesity and other serious chronic diseases.
- We will continue to work with schools as they implement these new standards to ensure that every child, in every community across America, has access to healthy and nutritious meals.
- We are happy to see kids taking an active role in their food choices and nutrition. Since one in three children are overweight or obese, and kids may consume as many as half their calories in schools, school meals play a critical role in reinforcing what kids are already learning about nutrition and healthy foods at home.
- Adapting to the changes may be challenging at first, as students are introduced to new flavors and foods in the cafeteria. That’s why USDA is encouraging students to be engaged in guiding and shaping the food selections made by their school districts. Students across the country are participating in taste testing sessions, providing feedback on meals to food service staff, and trying the new foods and recipes in the cafeteria every day.
- School meals - which are funded by taxpayers - should offer the healthiest meals possible and not contribute to health issues or drive up costs for Americans. The new standards ensure that children have the energy they need to learn in class and be physically active, while reducing their risk for obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, and other serious chronic diseases.
- Tremendous advancements in our understanding of what a healthy school meal should look like have occurred since the standards were last updated 15 years ago. The new school meals

are intended to be high in nutrients and adequate in calories, based on recommendations from the Institute of Medicine and consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs). Calorie levels can't be viewed without context, while the new calorie levels may be either lower or comparable to the previous minimum calorie standards, the new school meals portions are "right sized" to reflect the proper balance between food groups. In addition, USDA data shows that children have tended not to take all the food available to them in the cafeteria.

- The new school meals offer more fruits and vegetables at lunch than the previous meal pattern, and the amount of fruits will double at breakfast beginning school year 2014/15. Whole grains are also increased substantially.
- In practice, many students are being served the same amounts of protein under the new standards. For some age groups, the old standards permitted more than adequate amounts of meat/meat alternate to meet the nutritional (protein and iron) needs of children and adolescents. The new standards ensure that the requirements for meat/meat alternates for each age group are in line with current nutrition science.
- The new school meals are designed to meet only a portion of a child's nutritional needs over the course of the school day.
- Schools and families have options to help meet the needs of highly active students who may need additional calories, such as athletes. Schools have no limit on making available second helpings of fruits and vegetables, and depending on how close they are to the calorie limits, a second carton of milk may be an option. Schools can also structure after-school snack and supper programs to include service to athletes. In addition, individual students and/or sports teams can also supplement food provided through Federal programs with items provided from home or other sources.
- The development and implementation of the new standards have been applauded by and received the support of parent-teacher organizations, health, school and nutrition professional organizations, military and many other groups as a positive step to influence the health of our Nation's children.