

# School lunches have never been healthier

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By John Benson



When the news came out earlier this month that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) tweaked requirements for the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, there were plenty of raised eyebrows among parents wondering if high fructose corn syrup and dye-heavy foods were returning to school lunches across America.

Instead, the restriction change was more of a common sense variety relating to grain and protein limits – a slice of cheese, chicken on a salad, sandwich bread, et. al. – for school cafeteria lunch trays.

“It’s a very significant announcement, “School Nutrition Association (SNA) spokesperson Diane Pratt-Heavner told VOXXI. “There has always been a minimum amount of grains served, to make sure kids are getting large enough meals to fuel their school day. What was new about these standards was the weekly maximum, limiting the amount that could be served.”

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act called for more fruits and vegetables, less saturated fats and sodium. It also included weekly maximums for grain and protein. It was the latter that proved challenging for schools.

For example, most cafeterias have a hot entrée and daily alternate choices. If students didn't want the entrée, they could perhaps choose a peanut butter and jelly or deli sandwich, a salad option or a hummus and pita plate.

Pratt-Heavner said the SNA, which is a national, non-profit professional organization representing 55,000 school nutrition professionals across the country, was concerned about the issue from the start.

## **Menu planning for school lunches became an issue**

"We saw some very immediate unintended consequences in terms of a menu planning perspective because schools realized that at the elementary school level for instance, you couldn't have daily traditional sandwich choices as you had had for many years," Pratt-Heavner said. "Because one traditional piece of bread accounts for one grain, and there was a nine grain weekly limits for grains at elementary school level, schools could no longer offer those sandwiches every day of the week because they would exceed the weekly grain limits."

She added that schools faced unique choices including the elimination of daily options, as well as offering smaller portions a few days a week and eliminating cheese, chicken or burgers.

"You saw a lot of frustrated menu planners, students and as a result frustrated parents," Pratt-Heavner said. "Now, you have cheese going back on burgers and deli sandwiches. Also, the entrée choices could be slightly bigger. You might be able to have a little piece of whole grain garlic bread along with pasta."

Initially, the USDA reacted by temporarily lifting the weekly grain and protein limits numerous times over the past two years before its recent announcement to make the change permanent.

"Most importantly, the calorie maximums are still in place," Pratt-Heavner said. "The new standards put in place a maximum for the amount of calories with every meal, so this is just giving the schools more flexibility on how they use those calories in planning the menu."