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USDA Rule Hinders Progress in School Meals

GREAT FALLS, Va., Dec. 4, 2017—United States Department of Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue announced [an interim final rule](#) on Nov. 29, 2017 to give school districts more flexibility in meeting school meal standards set forth in the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010.

This School Meal Flexibility Rule by the Secretary will allow exemptions to schools “experiencing hardship” in serving products that are 51 percent whole-grain rich, will not require schools to meet the Target 2 level for reduced sodium, and give schools freedom to add back sugar-sweetened flavored milk to the menu.

The move comes at a stage of HHFKA implementation that nearly all schools have already reached, including an increase in fruits, vegetables and whole grains and limits on saturated fats and sodium. Sodium reduction Target 2 was to be the last of the standards to be implemented.

HHFKA was driven by rising rates of childhood obesity and early development of other health risk factors such as diabetes in children which follow them into adulthood. Schools are uniquely positioned to play a pivotal role in reversing these outcomes, with students under their roofs for one-third of the day. For students in some populations, a healthy school meal may be the only source of healthy, if any, foods available to them throughout the school day or week. Relaxation of the standards will interrupt the progress toward better health outcomes that have been achieved nationwide through this legislation. [Real Food for Kids](#) continues to support school districts that, regardless of any pending changes, are committed to following through implementing the current standards in their school meal programs to offer healthier options to students.

“The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act empowers schools to draw the connection between what’s being served in the cafeteria and what’s being learned in the classroom about nutrition and health, and those connections are enabling our kids to make better choices” said Real Food for Kids’ Executive Director, JoAnne Hammermaster, when the changes were first proposed last May. “Healthier kids are better positioned to learn; they are stronger physically and emotionally. Despite some challenges, most school systems see the value of implementing these guidelines. They are seeing the link between improvements in the cafeteria and improvements in the classroom. It’s essential we continue to support our students’ access to the best possible choices and advocate for these standards to stay on track.”

The positive impact of these changes is clear. Menu options nationwide are healthier and students are choosing those options and consuming more fresh fruits and vegetables, many of those from self-serve salad bars. Less waste is being reported as students select healthier foods they want to eat as opposed to foods they have been obligated to take but do not want. Many states are working proactively to help those districts that are challenged by the guidelines by providing training, toolkits, best practices and mentoring.

“Our students are the future members of our workforce,” says Hammermaster. “We have to make sure they not only have access to the best food in our schools but that those foods are a model for healthy choices they make outside those walls. We can’t relax when we’ve already made measurable progress, when this is just the beginning of a reversal of health trends that have plagued our kids for so long. We

have to make the investment in their health with the same commitment as we do in their education because good health is foundational to their success.”

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About Real Food for Kids

Real Food for Kids is a Fairfax County, VA-based nonprofit that collaborates with school communities to elevate the quality and character of school food, develops and delivers programs that advance literacy in nutrition and health, and engages students, parents and schools in building a culture of health that spreads to their homes and communities. The organization has chapters in and works with school systems throughout the Washington DC metro area.