

March 30, 2023

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We commend the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for the proposed new improved nutrition standards for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. The new rules will strengthen the important role of school meals in supporting good nutrition and equity. The proposed procurement rules will also support buying local and domestic foods for school meals.

The new standards will be critical to the health and learning of the nearly 30 million children who eat school lunches and 14 million who eat school breakfasts on an average school day. These meals fuel children by reducing hunger, improving children's health outcomes, protecting against childhood obesity, improving nutrition, and enhancing child development, learning, and school readiness. We applaud USDA for moving forward with these evidence-based healthy nutrition standards.

Stronger nutrition standards promote equity. After the implementation of the Healthy, Hunger Free-Kids Act, school meal diet quality, and student selection and consumption of healthy foods improved. USDA's new proposed nutrition standards are an important next step.

The proposed nutrition standards will make for a healthier school day. Reducing added sugars and sodium and ensuring plenty of whole grains will help decrease the risk of diet-related chronic disease and address disparities in child nutrition and health.

Demonstrating USDA's commitment to an equitable rule-making process, the rule reflects the messages offered by parents, children, teachers, and community leaders at the table during USDA's information-gathering process. The new standards heed the call for a balanced, reasonable approach to improving the standards in a practical way.

The proposed standards move us closer to alignment with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which is statutorily required by Congress. By building in time for planning, phasing in the requirements, and offering comprehensive training and technical assistance, USDA is supporting a successful transition for school food operators. The

process behind the school meal standards has always be founded upon the findings of independent reviewers and the scientific community. The signatories to this letter support that process and we ask that Congress continue to respect that long-standing tradition.

In closing, we appreciate USDA's carefully considered proposed rules for the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. Overall, healthy school meals mean better outcomes for children, schools, and communities. In addition, the school meal procurement rules will generate a positive impact on local and domestic agriculture and food production.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Pediatrics
American Federation of Teachers
American Heart Association
Arabella Advisors
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Children's Defense Fund
Food Corps
Food Research and Action Center
National Education Association
National Parent Teacher Association
Share our Strength
The Rockefeller Foundation
Urban School Food Alliance